# Mavericks of Italian Cinema

## Eight Unorthodox Filmmakers, 1940s–2000s

Roberto Curti

Mavericks of
Italian Cinema

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# Mavericks of Italian Cinema

*Eight Unorthodox Filmmakers, 1940s–2000s*

Roberto Curti

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Front cover: French sales flyer for the 1963 film *Il demonio* (courtesy Lucas Balbo)

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To my dear friend
Tommaso La Selva

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# A Note on the Essential Filmographies

The "Essential Filmographies" at the end of each chapter do not include short films. Story and script writing credits include significant contributions to the story or screenplay, either credited or uncredited. Films are listed chronologically by release date.

# Abbreviations

**Co-D** Co-director
**D** Director
**P** Producer
**S** Story
**SC** Screenplay

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# Introduction

Like a turbulent river fed by numerous tributaries, the history of Italian cinema in the second half of the 20th century is seething with undercurrents. Post–World War II Italian cinema, as seen from a foreigner's perspective, is usually broadly divided into two big categories: *auteur* and genre films. On the one hand, there are the works of the big-name directors: Rossellini, De Sica, Visconti, Fellini, Pasolini, Antonioni, etc. On the other, those movies designed for mass consumption: the sword-and-sandal, the Gothic, the spy thriller, the Western, *gialli*, crime films, up to the many threads that by the mid- to late 1970s took turns chaotically, from the cannibal movie to the zombie film. Some genre directors have in turn gained *auteur* status—Sergio Leone and Dario Argento, to name two. They offered films which adhered to the rules of the Western and thriller genres respectively, but in the meantime they deeply innovated said rules, paving the way for new threads and dozens of similar productions—or *hundreds*, in the case of the EuroWestern fever.

If *auteurs* brought the national production to the attention of foreign audiences and won prestigious awards, it was with the development of genres that the Italian industry found a profitable market abroad. From the late 1950s onward, an enormous number of works were designed not only for the home consumption but for export as well, until finally, in the 1980s, the industry virtually collapsed under the weight of the economic crisis it had been fighting during the previous decades, and gave way to the soft tyranny of television.

Like most simplifications, such a distinction leans on shaky foundations. It is illusory to think that the dichotomy between *auteur* and genre would cover the whole spectrum of a film industry that developed with an outstanding vitality after World War II. And yet, over the years this contraposition has increased dramatically.

With the birth of home video, in the early 1980s, a different type of cinephilia was born, based on aesthetics and ways of fruition different from the experience of moviegoing. Instead of physically going to the theater, film buffs would invest their time and money in videotapes, purchasing or swapping them with other collectors. For these cinephiles, the common goal was to dig deeper, often via a thick net of contacts all over the globe. Many films and filmmakers were thus exhumed to visibility, and as with other foreign filmographies, the cult aura that surrounded the "exotic" Italian cinema spread over an increasingly wider number of items and figures. The result was a blossoming of fanzines and magazines put together by a legion of enthusiastic fans: they were

crammed with reviews, interviews, retrospective articles, dictionaries, and comparisons between home video versions. It was a new generation of critics who wrote first and foremost about the films that they owned physically and idolized like fetishes.

In turn, with the birth and development of the Internet, countless newsgroups, forums, blogs, webzines and websites have taken over; meanwhile, over the past two decades, genre film studies have increased exponentially, whether they be monographies on individual directors or volumes devoted to a particular genre.

This gold rush of sorts had many positive aspects, not least the growing awareness of a valuable heritage of the past, in contrast with contemporary mainstream cinema perceived as hollow and uninteresting. It also allowed visibility to films that had been neglected in their home country, and to a fair reassessment of the qualities of genre production, as opposed to the biased and dismissive attitude of old-style critics.

But this reappraisal was not devoid of flaws either. In fact, it was often permeated by an auteurist approach, oblivious of the historical, cultural and economic context and conditioned by a strong anti-intellectualistic component, paired with an emphasis on some characteristics (such as shock value, for instance) and utter disregard for others. Similarly to what had happened with the most iconoclast French cinephiles in the 1950s, the main goal—either conscious or unconscious—was basically to overthrow the current aesthetic canons and build an alternate cinema history in which the obscure and the reviled would finally find their place in the limelight.

In the case of Italian cinema, this has led also to misleading and reductive labeling, mostly based upon a film's alleged belonging (or not belonging) in a genre. Moreover, some areas were often left out by foreign studies, namely those products devised for national audiences but less suited for export due to their characteristics: think of comedy, which relies heavily on dialogue and on elements (socio-political satire, depiction of regional types and mores, etc.) which are difficult to appreciate outside their country of origin.

But things, in Italian cinema and elsewhere, are never quite black or white, and they often inhabit a grey area whose boundaries are indistinct and deceptive. The perfect metaphor could be the image of David Hemmings developing the photograph he has taken in *Blow-up* (1966), and realizing that, the more he blows up the image, the less he is sure of what exactly it depicts, as shapes and contours become blurry.

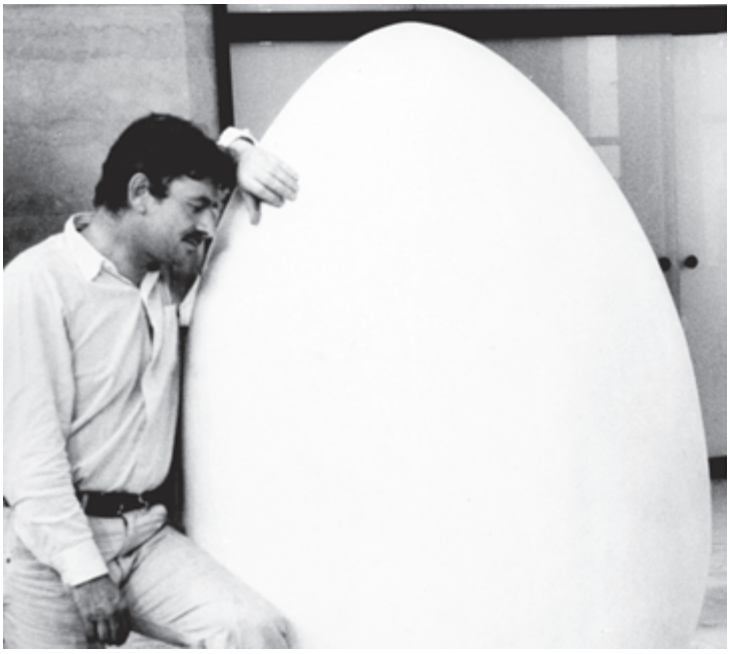
Besides the renowned *auteurs* and the many craftsmen and hacks, the Italian industry also embraced a number of peculiar personalities who defy any label, and whose artistic trajectories were often marginal or downright obscure. Blowing up the negative here means investigating a small group of filmmakers who either went under the radar, and benefited from little or no exposure abroad, for one reason or another, or were somehow misunderstood or mislabeled, leading to a somewhat incorrect perception of their work.

This book examines the life and work of eight directors who fit the latest category: Pier Carpi, Alberto Cavallone, Riccardo Ghione, Giulio Questi, Brunello Rondi, Paolo Spinola, Augusto Tretti and Nello Vegezzi. They made their films between the immediate post–World War II years up to the dawn of the new millennium, even though the bulk of their work dates roughly from the early 1960s to the late 1970s and early 1980s, with a couple of exceptions. They deserve a more in-depth study and a proper critical and historical analysis.

These are eight very different filmmakers, and yet with some interesting things in common. Firstly, they were anomalous figures. Isolated, refractory to the commercial rules (although sometimes their films *were* commercially successful), and difficult if not impossible to label within the boundaries of genre. They made films which were hard to export, as they were deeply imbued with Italian culture and its issues. Some of them were located outside the realm of Cinecittà, and were not connected with the big distribution companies that would guarantee ample visibility to their work. Finally, their peculiar artistic and productive trajectory led them to marginality and to oblivion even in their home country.

I labeled them "mavericks" to underline their unorthodox, independent nature and work. Their artistic and personal parables, if often discontinuous or plagued by economic, productive or personal issues, were nevertheless unique. But these peculiarities allow us to better understand the inner productive dynamics of Italian cinema, and take a closer look at the historical, cultural and economic circumstances that helped shape it over the years.

These "mavericks" were *auteurs* of sorts—or tried to be. They usually scripted their own films, and brought to their work their experience in different fields—poetry, painting, playwriting, advertising, film criticism, literature, comics. Their personal culture and world view, as well as their independent, nonconformist, sometimes antagonistic attitude, resulted in films which stood out amid the standard commercial production. And yet, their position within the movie industry was not strong enough for them to fully develop their vision, which led either to artistic and commercial compromise, isolation, or decline.



**Giulio Questi in summer 1967, on the set of *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* (1967) (courtesy Nocturno Cinema).**

With a couple of exceptions, their names are little known outside of Italy, and their marginal notoriety in the foreign markets is due to misleading factors. For instance, Giulio Questi is popular among film buffs for the visionary Western *Se sei vivo spara* (a.k.a. *Django Kill!*, 1967) and the offbeat *giallo*, *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* (a.k.a. *Death Laid an Egg*, 1967), which sport some of the elements championed by the new cinephilia, such as violence and sex. But Questi's approach to genres was unconven-

tional if not wholly anarchic, and his filmography is much more varied and complex than it might seem at first glance. Similarly, Brunello Rondi is known among some circles for his outstanding 1963 film *Il demonio*, often mislabeled as a horror movie; and his only work released to U.S. home video so far, the Laura Gemser vehicle *Velluto nero* (a.k.a. *Black Emanuelle, White Emanuelle*, 1976), might lead some to think he was an exploitation filmmaker akin to Aristide Massaccesi, which he definitely was not.

Through these eight characters, the reader can make a fascinating, alternative journey into post–World War II Italian cinema, and see things under a different perspective. Names such as Federico Fellini, Roberto Rossellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, Marco Ferreri and many more will turn up when we consider the peculiar career of Riccardo Ghione, the unsung grey eminence behind a truly revolutionary project, the ill-fated *Documento Mensile*, an attempt at reuniting renowned personalities from various artistic and cultural fields who would express themselves with a movie camera. In turn, Giulio Questi's path briefly crossed Ghione's, as well as that of important directors such as Fellini, Francesco Rosi, Elio Petri. Brunello Rondi co-scripted *La dolce vita* and several other Fellini films, and it was the Rimini-born Maestro who helped Augusto Tretti (his assistant on *Il bidone*) find a distributor for his debut *La legge della tromba*, and none other than Titanus' Goffredo Lombardo, Italy's biggest producer-distributor. Sometimes these unpredictable trajectories intersected briefly, forming a mosaic of untold stories which shares light on a film industry described in the immediate post-war years by Riccardo Ghione described as an extraordinary cauldron, boiling with projects and ideas.

Some of these "maverick" filmmakers had moved their first steps in documentary (a forced passage for many directors at that time, not least because of economic reasons, given the law benefits granted to these works), and in Ghione's case they would take the Neorealism experience to its extremes. But some of them also dabbled in advertising, which led to a further degree of complexity in their work. Their style could hardly be described as realistic: it was dramatically unusual, if not experimental. Giulio Questi used to say that cinema was a "new" language for the eyes, and with the help of his friend, editor Franco Arcalli, he experimented on film language, deconstructing traditional narrative in favor of an open, thought-provoking approach. Alberto Cavallone took inspiration from such varied sources as the *Nouvelle Vague*, Antonioni and Makavejev, all revisited through his own experience in documentary and advertising. Brunello Rondi blended ethnologic documentary and Surrealism in the extraordinary *Il demonio*. Riccardo Ghione, with *Il limbo*, helmed a *conte philosophique* played exclusively by newborn children. Paolo Spinola adopted a complex flashback structure in his ambitious debut, *La fuga* (1965), and played with the blurring of reality and appearance in *La donna invisibile* (1969). Nello Vegezzi's intention while shooting *Katarsis* (1963) was to make a completely dialogue-free film consisting mainly of long takes. Augusto Tretti opted for a Brechtian approach that was something unseen in Italian cinema. And Pier Carpi crammed his works with esoteric and Masonic references that made them something of an acquired taste for the initiate.

Recurring themes and references turn up here and there, from director to director, showing how these filmmakers related to the cultural trends of their time. One such is the condition of woman in contemporary Italy: a prisoner of the centuries-old patriarchal

traditions (*Il demonio*; Questi's *Arcana*, 1972) or bourgeois mores (*La fuga*; Rondi's *Valeria dentro e fuori*, 1972), who develops a neurosis that puts her in conflict with her family or the whole community. This condition will be either "cured" with the instruments of popular superstition, or brought to light through psychoanalysis. Apparently poles apart, these three works by Rondi, Questi and Spinola are in fact akin in their approach to female psychology, in a period of great socio-cultural changes in Italian society.

**French sales flyer for *Il demonio* (1963) (courtesy Lucas Balbo).**

Another topic was the criticism on the heritage of Fascism and the memory of World War II, whose wounds were not yet healed. Questi evoked the partisan war by way of the Western (*Se sei vivo spara*), Tretti revisited the Mussolini regime through the grotesque and Brechtian estrangement (*Il potere*, 1971), whereas Cavallone filmed the Frankfurt trials to Nazi criminals for his feature film debut, the semi-documentaristic *Lontano dagli occhi*. Similarly, the more politically tinged directors returned to the theme of the Third World and its struggle against colonialism, a recurring subject in Cavallone's work from *Le salamandre* (1969) to *Afrika* (1973), and which Questi wanted to develop into an unmade project starring Tomas Milian. The contradictions of consumerism were at the core of both *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* and *Il potere*, delivered through aggressively sarcastic symbols, with the image of a chicken farm becoming a central element in both films; but they also turned up in Ghione's grim *A cuore freddo* (1971).

The interest in the occult and the esoteric was another common factor. Rondi depicted the superstitious rituals of the South (*Il demonio*) and spiced a tale of conjugal misery with mystic and esoteric references (*Tecnica di un amore*, 1973). Questi explored the persistence of magic in present-day cities (*Arcana*), similarly to what Carpi did with his tale of urban middle-class witches in *Un'ombra nell'ombra* (1979). And Cavallone paid reference to Carlos Castaneda and Aldous Huxley's works on the doors of perception and the altered states of mind in his surrealistic hardcore film *Blow Job* (1980).

The artistic paths of these directors were often marked by their erotic content, as

well as by the resorting to extreme, gruesome or unpleasant images and situations. Embracing sex was primarily a commercial move which nonetheless allowed them to explore personal themes. Ghione took inspiration from Wilhelm Reich's work to dwell on the crisis of the bourgeoisie (*La rivoluzione sessuale*, 1968); Paolo Spinola approached the disintegration of marriage first in a psychoanalytic key (*La fuga*), then in a sociological (*L'estate*, 1966) and Fantastic one (*La donna invisibile*). Eroticism in Cavallone's work had a political and anti-bourgeois drive as well, as shown by *Le salamandre*, which caused a sensation with its depiction of an interracial lesbian relationship. Similarly, Brunello Rondi's interest in eroticism spawned from his early work and became more and more prominent, most notably in *Tecnica di un amore* and *I prosseneti* (1976). His 1973 film *Ingrid sulla strada*, the story of a young prostitute in modern-day Rome, featured one of the most violent sequences of the decade, which predated the excesses of Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975). On his part, Cavallone dealt with an imagery that liberally drew from the works of Georges Bataille and Lautréamont, and pushed the limits of sex and violence to the extreme in such works as *Maldoror* (1975), *Spell—Dolce mattatoio* (1977) and *Blue Movie* (1978).

**Alberto Cavallone in 1997, a few months before his death. Behind him, on the right, a detail of the Italian locandina for *Blow Job* (1980) (courtesy Nocturno Cinema).**

Due to the nonconformist nature of their work, hardly amenable to the quiet waters of commercial production, these "mavericks" were bound to be the target on the part of censors and magistrates. This was the case with Cavallone and especially Rondi, who caused a sensation when *Il demonio* premiered at the 1963 Venice Film Festival, and whose following films often had censorship issues. Spinola's *La donna invisibile* was seized because of its alleged obscenity, and a similar fate was reserved for Questi's *Se sei vivo spara*, judged too violent and gruesome, and *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*. But censorship could also be a commercial and political one: after the political satire *Il potere*, Augusto Tretti was practically ostracized by producers and even by television.

Even though most of them are, in this writer's opinion, accomplished (and sometimes first-rate) filmmakers, these eight "mavericks" were not chosen simply for artistic reasons. A couple of inclusions—namely, the first and last chapter, devoted respectively to Pier Carpi and Nello Vegezzi—defy a mere discourse on artistic merits, and take a different approach which aims to go beyond the simple critical analysis of their work.

Although credited as the director of two films (*Povero Cristo* and *Un'ombra nell'ombra*, the latter often dismissed as a cheap *Exorcist* rip-off) and claiming to have directed a third one (*Cagliostro*), Carpi in fact relied on his assistant, Gianni Siragusa, for the technical direction of *Povero Cristo,* while *Un'ombra nell'ombra* was completed

**Augusto Tretti, wearing a grotesque rubber mask with Benito Mussolini's features, in *Il potere* (1971).**

by production manager Piero Amati. And yet, Carpi is a very peculiar *auteur* figure, for his films encompass themes which he also developed in his other fields of expertise, namely comic books and novels, and form a cohesive body of work. What is more, his case shows once again how the film industry could enroll outsiders and give them the means to pursue their visions, no matter how deranged it would be. Producers could afford to bet on bizarre, and even provocative figures, and give way to risky projects: the anecdote of Goffredo Lombardo giving Augusto Tretti *carte blanche* for his film on the history of power, without even a script, is amazing in this respect. It was a huge sea, with nourishment for big and small fish alike—no matter that often the big fish ate small ones, it was part of the production cycle, for the very existence of the industry was based on the continuous outpour of "new fish" in its basin. On the other hand, the small fish could turn useful to the big ones, in a symbiosis process that recalled the hermit crab and the sea anemone, or the pilot fish swimming alongside sharks. Because, of course, there were plenty of sharks as well, and only the strong survived. The sad story of Nello Vegezzi is exemplary in this respect.

Bitten by the film bug, and fresh from a Parisian film school, Vegezzi was a provincial young man who relocated to Rome like many of his peers with the dream of becoming a director. He found a backer for his experimental film, *Katarsis*, halfway between Robbe-Grillet and behaviorism, with the special participation of a movie star such as Christopher Lee. But eventually Vegezzi was ousted from his own creation, which was re-cut, re-edited and reshaped with the inclusion of new footage, and turned into a cheap Gothic horror movie, *Sfida al diavolo*. The excruciating experience had devastating effects on his life. The history of Italian cinema is also one of many unknowns

like Vegezzi, who were exploited and crushed—especially those who pursued an adventurous, unsafe path, much to their own disgrace.

This whole state of things could not last forever. The movie industry dealt with economic crisis for the best part of two decades, as shown not only by the typical procedure of jumping the bandwagon behind the latest box-office sensation, but also by the ever-growing, chaotic accumulation of threads, often hybridizing in bizarre concoctions which tried to be several different things at the same time. Then came the inevitable collapse.

The downhill parable of the Italian film industry is evident through those of Alberto Cavallone and Brunello Rondi. When he started, Cavallone had political ambitions, and tried to mix documentary and avant-garde, adding sex to the mix when the time came ripe for the loosening of censorship. For a while he was considered an offbeat, countercurrent *auteur*, an explorer of eroticism who would please the masses while at the same time paying reference to Georges Bataille and Frantz Fanon. But by the end of the 1970s he was forced to crank out hardcore porn under a pseudonym in order to survive. Similarly, Rondi—a successful playwright, film critic, poet and scriptwriter, not to mention a close friend of the *auteur* par excellence of Italian cinema—went from adapting a Pasolini novel to shooting women-in-prison flicks and exotic sexploitation fare.

This cultural decline was harshly criticized by Augusto Tretti in his 1980 movie *Alcool*, which features a biting take on the producers' will to cram their films with sex and violence, at the expense of the filmmakers' artistic visions. In this respect, Tretti and Spinola's trajectories can be read as polar opposites to those of Rondi and Cavallone. Tretti kept working on scripts which no one would ever finance, secluded in his villa in Verona, hundreds of miles from Rome; Spinola, rather than accept compromises and

**Left to right: Vittoria Centroni, Nello Vegezzi and Alice Paneque on the set of *Katarsis* (1963) (courtesy Camillo Vegezzi).**

work on projects he was not happy with, simply chose to stay away from the business altogether, and retired to his family's winery for good.

The only one who adapted to the mutated times was Giulio Questi, who moved from the big screen to television, and in his final years directed several thought-provoking, brilliant homemade shorts, produced in total independence and utter solitude. These no-budget efforts show a restless creative effort and a lucidity lacking in many younger indie filmmakers of the new millennium. Up to the very end, Questi experimented with the medium, and found a way to keep turning his vision into images. He was a maverick to the last.

So, here they are, eight filmmakers and their stories, their dreams and delusions, their triumphs and defeats. This is just part of the story, mind you. These eight "mavericks of Italian cinema" are just a selected group, a small number of specimens fished out of the ocean for scientific purpose. Many more are still waiting to be rediscovered and studied, both as further pieces in the puzzle and as noteworthy filmmakers in their own right. This book doesn't aim to be exhaustive. It is a stone thrown in the pond, a bait to the scholars, *connoisseurs* and cinephiles alike, an invitation to dive deeper in the great ocean of Italian cinema.

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# 1

# Pier Carpi— The Man Who Would Be Cagliostro

Few outside North Korea are familiar with the name Pak Doo-Ik. However, this exotic-sounding name will ring a bell to many Italians, possibly male, middle-aged and devoted football fans. On July 19, 1966, at minute 42 of the match between Italy and North Korea taking place at Ayresome Park, Middlesbrough, at the FIFA World Cup held in England, Pak Doo-Ik scored the goal that caused Italy to be eliminated from the World Cup during the first round. It was not only the biggest upset of the World Cup so far, but nothing short of a national humiliation, as the Italian team, which included such top players as Gianni Rivera and Giacomo Bulgarelli, was regarded as one of the favorites for the coveted prize. North Korea beating Italy was like David slaying Goliath. Adding insult to injury, according to the newspapers of the period, Pak Doo-Ik was not even a professional player but a dentist (he was in fact a gym teacher). To the vast majority of Italians, the main party responsible for the elimination was one and one only: the coach, Edmondo Fabbri, who became the subject of a seething press campaign and a target for the hatred of the majority of soccer fans all over the country.

Less than two months later, when newspapers reported that an association named "Amici di Edmondo Fabbri" (Friends of Edmondo Fabbri) had just been founded, the news raised a stir. The promoters of the bizarre initiative were three young men based in Milan: Paolo Sala, Alfredo Castelli and Arnaldo Piero Carpi. The three claimed to have received many threatening letters, one of which promised them "machine-gun lead." But what exactly did these "friends of Fabbri" want, the understandably perplexed journalist who reported the news on Italy's most popular newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, asked himself.[1] In hindsight, the association itself looks just a Situationist joke, the kind of provocative initiative that would attract lots of publicity and controversy upon its makers. Such episodes would become a frequent occurrence during the course of the life of one of the three individuals involved in the gimmick, making him quite a very popular name despite the niche quality of much of his work.

A comic book writer, a humorist, a novelist, a film director; an occult scholar and a freemason, a friend and biographer of the notorious Licio Gelli; an admirer of Cagliostro and Prince Vittorio Emanuele of Savoy, Julius Evola and Jacqueline Kennedy; a Renaissance man in modern times, born contrarian, master of self-promotion, mythomaniac.

This and much more was Arnaldo Piero Carpi, better known as Pier Carpi, one of the most bizarre figures in the Italian cultural world to emerge during the second half of the 20th century.

## *From* Diabolik *to* Horror

Born in Scandiano, near the Emilian town of Reggio Emilia, on January 16, 1940, Arnaldo Piero Carpi grew up in a boarding school without meeting his parents. After art school, he started hanging out at the local newspapers, and collaborated with the *Gazzetta di Parma*: he would later label himself as "half-Parmesan, half Reggiano—like the cheese." In 1961, he moved to Milan; there, in his own words, he learned "how to typeset, proofread, compose with linotype, and starve."[2] Carpi started working in the advertising business as ghost copywriter, and eventually found a job at the humorous magazine *Bertoldo*, published by Gino Sansoni.

It was around that time that Angela Giussani, Sansoni's wife, decided to start her own business as a comic book writer. As Carpi recalled, "I was 21 when Diabolik was born. Angela and Luciana Giussani found a book on a train, with no cover and with the first pages missing. It was a *Fantômas* novel, they were enthusiastic about it and wanted to create a similar comic book character. Sansoni, Angela's husband, financed everything, to keep his wife and sister-in-law busy. Angela was undecided on the character's name: Diabolik or Diabolicus? I insisted on Diabolik and eventually she agreed with me."[3] Carpi claimed to have written at least 60 stories for *Diabolik*, including the final one, where the characters' secrets are revealed, and which Giussani kept in a drawer, hoping never to publish it. He also wrote the first Diabolik novel, published by Sansoni, and was the editor-in-chief of a series of novels inspired by the comic book.

Carpi even took part in the first, and unfortunate attempt at bringing the character to the big screen. "The idea came from Tonino Cervi, and the first outline was written by Corrado Farina, with whom we concocted the Caroselli at the Studio Armando Testa, and myself. Then Cervi sold everything to De Laurentiis, who summoned the Giussani sisters in Rome. Doctor Sansoni accompanied them. Like all the movie business people, De Laurentiis said that the movie would make the authors gain no less than a hundred million *lire*. Sansoni, with his characteristic style, said: 'Ten million. Scrape together and easily. The other ninety, you can keep 'em as a gift….'"[4] However, De Laurentiis' *Diabolik*, directed by Mario Bava and released in 1968, was very different from Cervi's original project and didn't feature any contribution on Carpi's part.

Slowly the wheel of fortune started to turn for the hard-working Carpi. In 1963 he collaborated with *Topolino*, the Italian magazine based on Walt Disney characters, for which in his own estimation he wrote "about 300 stories"; he worked as an illustrator for the *Giallo Mondadori* and *Segretissimo* series; he debuted as a narrator, with the humoristic novel *La morte facile* (1964), the first in a long series of books on various topics, from occultism (*Storia della magia*, 1968; *Le società segrete*, 1969; *I mercanti dell'occulto*, 1974) to monographies of real-life or literary characters, such as *Il Mistero di Sherlock Holmes* (1968) or *Rasputin ultimo profeta* (1975), to name just a couple.

Carpi was an equally versatile comic book writer. For Mondadori, besides *Topolino*,

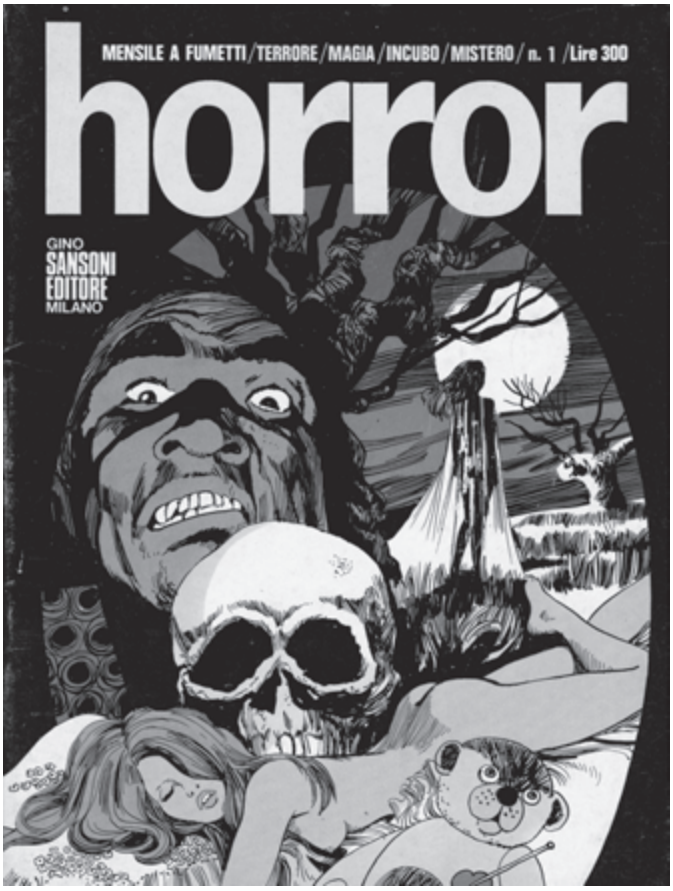
he scripted stories for the Italian versions of Superman (still called "Nembo Kid" in Italy at that time) and Batman, and created new characters for other publishers. *Zakimort* (published starting August 1965, with 115 issues up to January 1974) was a toned-down female version of *Diabolik*—whose sleeve design the comic patently resembled—created for Sansoni: it was about a rich heiress, Fedra, the daughter of a notorious gangster, who moonlights as a masked vigilante named Zakimort to avenge her father, and cultivates an impossible love for her adversary, police lieutenant Norton. Other comics created by Carpi during the mid–1960s were *I Naufraghi* and *Lancillotto* (drawn by comic artist Tino Zaniboni), both destined to young kids and published on the weekly *Il Giorno dei Ragazzi*; *Nic Cometa*, about a race car driver styled on Jean Graton's *Michel Vaillant*; *Teddy Bob* (subtitled *Beat, il fumetto giovane*: 154 issues from July 1966 to November 1972), inspired by the Beat movement and featuring amusing linguistic inventions à la Anthony Burgess; *I serpenti* (7 issues between 1967 and 1968, with drawings by Annibale Casabianca), another "*fumetto nero*" about a task force of creepy antiheroes; and *Boy—Il fumetto Bang! Bang! Bang!* (8 issues, August 1968–March 1969), which nodded at the gangster thread.

In addition to sporting an enviable hyperproductivity, Pier Carpi was also a tireless self-promoter, and often managed to carve out a niche for himself in the newspapers, whether to tout his intervention as a speaker at a conference on "Parents' reaction to the varied diffusion of sex and violence,"[5] or to write an open letter to Franco Zeffirelli (at work on a movie on Saint Francis, which would become *Fratello sole, sorella luna*) asserting that the film's "moral claims and the various characters' traits … coincide almost completely with the thesis and the tale of *Francesco '70*,"[6] a short story published by Carpi three years earlier. Accusations of plagiarism would be a recurrent weapon for Carpi, who often captured a few square inches in the news with the most futile pretexts, displaying a flair for theatrics and a disregard of the ridiculous that went along with his incredible creative prolificacy.

The writer's partnership with Sansoni was long and fruitful. Carpi became editor-in-chief of the series *Il romanzo di Diabolik*, he curated the short story anthology *Racconti neri* and the comic book omnibus *Il mago*; he created a comic version of *Pinocchio* illustrated by Giovanni Manca; he published an anthology of his own jokes previously published in the magazine *Settimana Radio TV* (*Il cattivissimo—1000 buoni motivi per spegnere il televisore*); he redacted several entries (including his own…) in the ponderous *Enciclopedia dei fumetti* (Encyclopedia of Comics), in two volumes. Last but not least, together with his friend (and friend of Edmondo Fabbri…) Alfredo Castelli, he gave birth to one of the most extraordinary magazines ever to appear in Italy.

In December 1969 *Horror* debuted in newsstands. As the name announced, it focused on comics, short stories, essays, poetry, movie reviews and interviews on the theme. The monthly magazine, edited by Carpi and Castelli, featured extraordinary comic artists (Dino Battaglia, Marco Rostagno, Leo Cimpellin) and many prestigious authors, such as Ornella Volta, Orio Caldiron, Piero Zanotto, Emilio de' Rossignoli, Gianfranco De Turris and Sebastiano Fusco. Among them, there was also room for a young film enthusiast named Luigi Cozzi, who had just directed a science fiction movie inspired by a Frederik Pohl novel and co-scripted by Castelli, *Il tunnel sotto il mondo*. Cozzi interviewed many protagonists of Italian horror and Fantastic cinema (Mario

Bava, Riccardo Freda, Antonio Margheriti, Carlo Rambaldi, Ernesto Gastaldi…), and in fact his pioneering work was one of the very first attempts to validate Italian genre cinema by giving room and word to its makers. For his part, Sansoni had no problem in publishing material pirated from foreign magazines (such as the works of Philippe Druillet) without paying the royalties: Castelli aptly nicknamed him "The Black Pirate." Among Carpi's contributions, the strip *Beatrice*, drawn by Rostagno, stood out. The titular witch, naked and tied to an ever-burning stake, supposedly in the Middle Ages, is the witness of various encounters between emblematic historical and fictional characters, such as Dante Alighieri, Leonardo Da Vinci, Wilhelm Tell, Saint Anthony, a horned demon, an Anti-Pope. Carpi and Rostagno openly played with erotic provocation, at a time where adults-only *fumetti* were the rule, by juxtaposing the girl's nudity, present in almost every panel, with ambitious satirical lines of dialogue that regularly poked fun at contemporaneity.




**Front cover for issue #1 (December 1969) of the magazine *Horror*, edited by Pier Carpi and Alfredo Castelli.**

Despite its outstanding content, *Horror* was doomed to failure: sales amounted to 30,000 copies, a low figure in Italy at a time where the most popular comics and magazines sold a hundred thousand copies, and Sansoni was forced to cease its publication in October 1972, after 31 issues.

## *From* Cagliostro *to Christ*

The mail column in *Horror* was a hoot, as the readers' letters were summarized in a few lines, followed by withering, sharp replies from Carpi's vitriolic pen. Those replies also underlined the editors' political and ideological orientation. In issue #14, a reader who complained about a piece on the controversial philosopher Giulio Cesare Andrea Evola, best known as Julius Evola ("He is a Fascist, and you…"), received the following

reply: "Julius Evola is the greatest philosopher alive. If to you he is a Fascist, go ahead and make propaganda for Fascism." Which, only a few months after the Golpe Borghese—a last-minute aborted *coup d'état* planned for December 8, 1970, by the neo-Fascists, headed by Prince Junio Valerio Borghese[7]—was quite a provocative stance.

In the same issue, a reader asked if, given his articles on Vittorio Emanuele of Savoy, Prince of Naples (the son of Umberto II, the last king of Italy), he was a monarchist sympathizer, Carpi curtly called himself "only a journalist." With, should be added, a prodigious imagination. According to Castelli, "All of a sudden, he jumped up and said: 'Yesterday I took the plane and paid a visit to Reza.' Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Persia! … He would pretend to make phone calls, like: 'Hello? Oh, hi Burt!' Burt Lancaster.… I wondered why he told such idiotic stories, about these famous characters that he said he knew … however, he really met some of them. For instance, through the Freemasons he had gotten in touch with the Prince of Naples, and wrote an important memorial about the prince and [his wife] Marina Doria for the weekly magazine *Oggi*—I didn't like this thing, but he bragged so much about it."[8] In fact, during that period Carpi published two books centered on Vittorio Emanuele of Savoy, the biography *Io Vittorio Emanuele principe in esilio* (MEB, 1971), and the novel *Il principe. Un romanzo del Risorgimento* (Sugar, 1971), the latter co-written (at least officially) with the prince himself.

It is no secret that Carpi's main interests gravitated around Freemasonry as well as esotericism, as proven by his contributions to *Horror* and his books on the subject. His (auto)biography on the *Enciclopedia dei fumetti* ends by unveiling his "secret battle": the rehabilitation of Count Alessandro di Cagliostro, the 18th century adventurer and self-styled magician condemned by the Inquisition for heresy, "whom Pier Carpi admires as much as Faust, Hermes Trimegistus, Agrippa, Apollonio." And it was with a film project on Cagliostro that the writer approached the world of cinema once again, after the brief stint in the mid–1960s. In the summer of 1971 newspapers reported that shooting had started for an Italian-Japanese co-production to be filmed at the Fortress of San Leo, the castle where the occultist was imprisoned and died, and based "on the documents and studies of writer Pier Carpi." Accordingly, the story was centered on the idea of Cagliostro as a scapegoat of a plot against him by the French court and the papacy, "a victim of his time, persecuted by his ideas,"[9] who did not have anything to do with the Palermitan adventurer Giuseppe Balsamo, with whom Cagliostro was commonly identified. The movie was to be directed by Gianni Mario (who had been Ermanno Olmi's assistant on *Un certo giorno*, 1969) and starring Marcello Tiller as Cagliostro; illustrious participations were rumored, such as Mireille Mathieu (Queen Elizabeth), Trevor Howard (Balsamo) and even Salvador Dalí as the Great Inquisitor.

The movie disappeared in the limbo of unfilmed projects, but a few months later Carpi published his book *Cagliostro il taumaturgo* (MEB, 1972), where he carried on his theory of Cagliostro as the "last victim of the Inquisition … the last great persecuted who did not renege his own ideas, and did not bow to torture and humiliations." In addition to presenting himself as a righter of wrongs, Carpi launched cryptic messages between the lines, aimed at the present: "The years we are living, because of the signs that are coming to us, warn that the time is near.… Not by chance, on the eve of great historical upheavals, singular characters appear, who are very similar one to another and are destined to leave a big imprint behind them."[10] However, Carpi's enterprise was

overshadowed by another competitor: Roberto Gervaso's biography *Cagliostro*, which won the prestigious Bancarella prize. News reported that Carpi challenged the rival to a duel.

A movie on Cagliostro was eventually released in February 1975. It was financed by Rodolfo Putignani, a jeweler and real estate dealer who became a film producer in the mid–1970s, and whose career in the movies stopped abruptly in the early 1980s after some serious issues with Italian justice.[11] The producer gathered a prestigious cast, led by Bekim Fehmiu and Rosanna Schiaffino (who had both starred in another Putignani production, Giuseppe Rosati's *Il testimone deve tacere*, 1974). *Cagliostro* also featured Curd Jürgens, Massimo Girotti, Luigi Pistilli and Robert Alda; there were even rumors of a special participation by Marlon Brando, who, according to a news agency, would also act in Pier Carpi's next film, to be shot in Argentina,[12] but eventually neither event occurred.

There has been some debate on who was the movie's real director: the opening credits list Daniele Pettinari, then the husband of actress Enrica Bonaccorti, as director. And yet actress Ida Galli, a.k.a. Evelyn Stewart, was adamant that the *éminence grise* of the project was actually Carpi,[13] who was mentioned as the film's director in the news on the imminent shooting that started appearing in newspapers in spring 1973.[14] Whereas according to the producer's press office, "Carpi showed up on the set only when he knew that some photographer would take a picture of him and thus highlight his activity among actors and extras."[15]

In recent times, assistant director Gianni Siragusa shed light on the mystery, attributing to himself the actual paternity of the film.

> The others only signed it.... Daniele Pettinari was only a photographer: his wife was a scriptwriter and joined Carpi, to help him write the film, but she asked that her husband be in the film as assistant director. But Pettinari couldn't do anything, he didn't know the ABC of filming, the basic rules ... he was a photographer and could only take photographs. Eventually he had an argument with Pier Carpi and said that he wanted to sign the film by himself. And he did. But I shot it, because Pier Carpi was a friend of mine. Have you ever seen another film signed by Pettinari? ... He "stole" the film from Pier Carpi, and put his name as director, and I witnessed that.[16]

For his part, upon the film's release, Carpi announced an intervention "to cut the gratuitous nude scenes as well as any vulgarity which is detrimental to the film's artistic value." Which sounds puzzling, since the movie was actually passed by the board of censors with no cuts and for all audiences.

*Cagliostro* did rather well at the box office. Nevertheless, despite its commercial ambitions and the prestigious names involved, it is a bizarre, anti-commercial film, which seems to have been made by and for a selected number of initiated, as proved by the many references to Freemasonry which accompany the story of Cagliostro. The titular character is depicted as a cross between Nostradamus and Jesus Christ: he predicts the French Revolution and heals the lame, and his life story is told through a series of scenes barely linked together by prophecies, visions and redundant dialogue. As for Fehmiu, then a big name in Italy after his role as Ulysses in the made-for-TV version of Homerus' tale *Odissea* (1968, Franco Rossi, Piero Schivazappa and Mario Bava), a reviewer of the period described him, wryly, "nonchalant as a center-forward football player rather than problematic as a thinker."[17]

**Publicity still of Pier Carpi behind the camera.**

After the unfortunate experience of *Cagliostro*, it was clear that Carpi had been bitten by the film bug, and had no intention of giving up. Indeed, he put a halt to his activity as a comic book writer and dedicated himself, heart and soul, solely to literature and movies. In 1974, he published a gloomy esoteric novel, *Un'ombra nell'ombra*, and followed it with his official debut behind the camera, which he announced to newspapers as "a religious *giallo*,"[18] *Povero Cristo*. In quite a bizarre casting choice, Carpi cast Mino Reitano in the lead. The Calabrian-born singer, very popular among Southern immigrants abroad, had previously starred in a couple of bizarre flicks, the Western *Tara Pokì* (1971, Amasi Damiani) and *Una vita lunga un giorno* (1973, Ferdinando Baldi), an offbeat variation on *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932) revisited as a *film noir* and set in the coastal town of Sanremo—home of a popular song contest, the Sanremo Music Festival, held annually since 1951. As usual, to promote *Povero Cristo*, Carpi went over the top with his publicity gimmicks: the press reported that the director had forced Reitano (allegedly chosen over Giancarlo Giannini, Adriano Celentano and Al Pacino…) to lose 15 kilograms, and had even considered hiding his star under the pseudonym "Jan Ruskov" to take the viewers off guard.[19]

The project was ambitious and multimedia: the film was followed by a novel of the same name, published by Editrice Nord. *Povero Cristo*, proof of the author's Catholic fervor, had an antecedent in the novel *Gesù contro Cristo* (written in 1973 but rejected by publishers and eventually issued only in 1997 by Simonelli), of which a transposition for the big screen had been announced a couple years earlier, with Silverio Blasi (director

of the mini-series *Come un uragano*) as director, and Marlon Brando and Irene Papas in the cast. *Gesù contro Cristo* was to have been filmed in Italy, Tunisia and England, and the press reported that the producers were looking for a kid (or a little girl) of about eight to eleven years old for the role of Jesus. "The film promises to be staggering," the newspapers vainly promised. "Both the documents and the findings are jealously kept in the safe of a Swiss bank. Among other things, in the film—as in Pier Carpi's book—it will be proven that the Wise Men were four and not three, and that the Tower of Babel was no more than thirteen feet high."[20]

Similarly to the aborted *Gesù contro Cristo*, Carpi's film debut presents an idiosyncratic vision of the Gospel, set in the present day. The *mise-en-scène* looks like shabby avant-garde theater, the actors are dazed, the set pieces are sketchy, and the odd surreal flourishes make the experience even weirder—if the storyline wasn't enough. Reitano is Giorgio Cavero—the initials G.C., as in Gesù Cristo (Jesus Christ) give away the big twist right at the beginning—a 33-year-old adoptive son of a sculptor/carpenter and an aspiring detective; a mysterious guy in a fur (Curd Jürgens) offers him 100 million *lire* to find evidence of the existence of Jesus Christ. Guess how it ends.

Welcome to the Gospel according to Pier Carpi: Pietro (Enrico Beruschi) is a fishmonger, Pilate is a police commissioner, Satan (Edmund Purdom) is dressed like Mandrake the Magician, and so on. And, just to make things clear, in case someone did not get it, Carpi (who has a cameo as a guy reading a book by … Pier Carpi) inserts a pedantic expository scene at the end. And yet, despite the desperate ugliness of it all, Reitano plays a proletarian Christ that's much more sincere and touching than the blue-eyed, holy card Jesus played by Robert Powell in Franco Zeffirelli's TV mini-series *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977). Cavero speaks of the "memory of hunger" and the "smell of misery" as someone who has experienced these things the hard way, and preserves an indelible memory of them. And the sequence of the wedding at Cana (with Ida Galli/Evelyn Stewart as the Virgin Mary), when Giorgio replaces the bad wine at the wedding table with "our wine, from our land," is a moment that seems lifted straight out of a Sergio Citti film, and deserves a place in an ideal anthology of Italian proletarian cinema.

As with *Cagliostro*, however, the real paternity of the film, at least technically, must be attributed to the assistant director, Gianni Siragusa:

> After *Cagliostro*, Pier called me back and told me he wanted to make *Povero Cristo* and he wanted to sign it, but I shot the movie for him. He showed up on the set four or five times, once to play a brief role.… And he signed it, while I am credited as assistant director. I had promised it to him: "The film is yours, Pier, you are the director!" When he showed up on the set, I told him: "Come on, say 'Camera, action!,' let them see you're the director!"[21]

## *From the Coven to the Lodge*

Despite the shrewd barrage of press and the screening at the Venice Film Festival, in the "Spazio Aperto" (Open Space) collateral section, *Povero Cristo* was definitely not a commercial success upon its release in January 1976. Still, Carpi did not give up his celluloid dreams, and started working on his next project, an adaptation of his own novel *Un'ombra nell'ombra*, the story of a sisterhood of witches in modern-day Italy,

who belong to various social classes but are unable to integrate into society, and are doomed not to find the love of men. Set in a *petit bourgeois* Milan setting of unspeakable squalor, "a city that laughs of its own sadness painted on the hidden cheerfulness," it is an unpleasant novel, centered on a witch named Carlotta, the mother of 13-year-old Daria, whose blooming magic powers are far superior to those of all the other witches; unlike the latter, Carlotta is able to use them at will, and has chosen to serve the dark side; Carlotta and her coven of witches try in vain to stop her, but even the help of a young priest, who performs a ritual on the girl, proves useless. Besides the references to the Satanic thread *en vogue* at the time, *Un'ombra nell'ombra* was an ambitious work, which showed how Carpi's interests were now far beyond the realm of the comic book, with passages of minutious realism and oneiric, visionary and esoteric digressions; there, the author's thematic staples found fertile terrain, including the provocative rejection of the issues related to contemporary Christianity: "There is more life in the plaster statues of saints than in all the theological disputes of our time," a telling line states.

The film adaptation was initially to be titled *La signora delle mosche* (The Lady of the Flies), with reference to one of the book's key symbols in the novel, the fly which Carlotta keeps in a little plastic box, and which, in perhaps the book's most unsettling passage, she breastfeeds. For the main roles, Carpi's tentative cast as announced to the newspapers included Jean Seberg, Claudia Marsani, Marilù Tolo and Terence Stamp. He even revealed to press agencies to have hired Jacqueline Kennedy for a small role.[22] Jackie O was one of Carpi's obsessions, as proven by the 1978 novel *Quella notte nel palazzo d'estate Adolf Hitler strangolò Jacqueline Kennedy* (That Night in the Summer Palace Adolf Hitler Strangled Jacqueline Kennedy), the stage play *Mandrake a Dallas* (Mandrake in Dallas) and the 1980 essay *La banda Kennedy* (The Kennedy Gang). The definitive cast was quite different, though: the film starred Anne Heywood (as Carlotta), Lara Wendel (as Daria), Valentina Cortese, Irene Papas, Victoria Zinny, Marisa Mell, and a trio of has-beens in brief hit-and-run cameos: Ian Bannen, as a professor who teaches chess and preaches to the whores; Frank Finlay, as an occult writer; and John Phillip Law—who was trying to rebuild himself a career in Europe, and who during the same period starred in the ghost story *Un sussurro nel buio* (1976, Marcello Aliprandi) and in the weird psychological thriller *L'occhio dietro la parete* (1977, Giuliano Biagetti)—as a priest who is losing his faith in God. The producer, uncredited, was the Lebanese Anis Nohra, who had financed Michael Cacoyannis' *The Trojan Women* (1971) and Damiano Damiani's *Il sorriso del grande tentatore* (1974), but there was also the financial intervention of a Sicilian investor with artistic velleities, a certain Ferrara, who reportedly requested that some additional scenes be included in the movie.

Shooting was set to start in October 1976, between Rome and Zagreb. To keep a high profile in the press, Carpi resorted to one of his favorite gimmicks, by denouncing for plagiarism the authors of the TV mini-series *Dimenticare Lisa*, from a Francis Durbridge novel. According to Carpi, the British novelist had looted his short story *La modella invisibile*: "Unfortunately it is not the first time that television is stealing from my work," Carpi complained. "In the past I have been accommodating, but this time the plagiarism is so blatant as to force me to act without half measures."[23] Nothing is known about Durbridge's reaction, but the threatened legal action never materialized.

Filming was postponed to January 1977, but in the meantime Carpi published one

of the decade's most unlikely best sellers: *Le profezie di Papa Giovanni* (The Prophecies of Pope John XXIII). According to the author, during his apostolic delegation in Turkey in 1935, future pope Angelo Roncalli became affiliated with the Rosicrucians, and dedicated himself to the divination of the future. Carpi claimed to have received the Pope's prophecies from a mysterious old man he met in San Leo da Montefeltro, during research for his book on Cagliostro. Among the predictions, which go as far as 2033, are the killing of the two Kennedys, Marilyn's suicide ("The president will fall, his brother will fall. Between them, the body of the innocent star"), the wedding between Jacqueline and Onassis, and so on. The Vatican protested, and someone objected that Mesembria, the place where Roncalli stayed in 1935, is actually located in Bulgaria, not Turkey.[24] But this small geographic inaccuracy was nothing compared to such a treasure trove of divinations, and the book became one of the writer's most successful releases, and was translated into French and Spanish.

Meanwhile, though, filming for *Un'ombra nell'ombra* went on amid great difficulty. Carpi had asked his friend Gianni Siragusa to assist him, but the latter was busy on another film project and could not oblige. In February 1977 newspapers reported that Victoria Zinny had left the film, after refusing to deliver the following line, initially not included in the script: "*L'aborto è un'idea mostruosa. I governi che lo permettono sono composti da delinquenti.*" (Abortion is a monstrous idea. The governments that allow it are composed of criminals.)[25] Shortly thereafter shooting was interrupted because of lack of funds, but Carpi's activity did not stop. He reinvented himself as a television commentator in the show "Il Punto," broadcast on the Tele Nord Italia channel, and in 1978 he published two books: a strange mystical science fiction novel, *Johannes delle grandi sabbie* (Johannes of the Great Sands) and the pastiche *Quella notte nel palazzo d'estate Adolf Hitler strangolò Jacqueline Kennedy*. The latter provided the opportunity for the umpteenth threat of legal action in October of that year, this time against the movie *Zio Adolfo in arte Führer* (1978, Castellano & Pipolo), starring Adriano Celentano and Amanda Lear: Carpi demanded it be seized, since according to him it was a blatant plagiarism of the last chapters of his own novel.[26]

Filming for *Un'ombra nell'ombra* resumed in early 1979, after the intervention of the then 28-year-old production manager Piero Amati, who would regret it for the rest of his life. In an amusing interview conducted *testiculis tactis* ("Never, ever mention that damn film which brings bad luck … don't you ever mention it!"), Amati explained: "There were two weeks left to shoot. So, I took over the movie, finished it and even found buyers … all those who approached it, have had misfortunes."[27] And indeed Amati would go bankrupt soon after completing it.

*Un'ombra nell'ombra* was finally released theatrically in fall 1979, preceded by Carpi's customary baits thrown at the press. Newspapers reported the director's statements that Irene Papas had been persecuted by a ghost inside the castle Vignanello, where the scene of Daria's exorcism takes place: "Papas, who never believed in supernatural forces, found herself entangled in this nightmare, with a presence that obsessed her day and night, grabbed her by the neck and the legs and dragged her away, in front of everyone, amid screams."[28] As a result, of course, the footage was much more compelling and realistic, as Carpi pointed out.

The movie follows the book rather closely, but there are some key differences

between them. The setting has been moved to Rome's EUR district, and the story features the character of Lucifer, absent in the book, and possibly introduced to make the film more commercially palatable: played by Ezio Miani, a popular photonovel actor, the devil sports a fashionable jumper and a white scarf, and turns out to be Daria's real father. The vicissitudes of its troubled shooting are blatant: some sequences, such as Lucifer's appearance behind a crumbling wall, in front of Carlotta and the professor, and the suicide of Lena's character (played by Valentina Cortese), were shot with stand-ins that did not even remotely look like the actors. The movie features ample nudity (including a scene where Irene Papas' character appears with no clothes: the Greek actress is obviously replaced with a body double), and a parade of sexy starlets of 1970s Italian cinema in small roles: Patrizia De Rossi (a.k.a. Patrizia Webley), Paola Tedesco, Dirce Funari, Sofia Dionisio, Carmen Russo.

In October 1979, Carpi, with the support of an organization called Accademia dei Bardi (headed by humorist Bruno Rabajotti and featuring in its "honor committee" such noted names as Valentina Cortese, Carlo Lizzani and politician Ugo La Malfa—one wonders whether willingly or not), launched in a crusade against pornography. It was the second time Carpi gave vent to his ideas about the growing presence of nudity and eroticism in the movies, and on this occasion he claimed he would report to the judiciary "121 parish theaters which … screened movies that transgress the norms of the code written to protect children, not to mention outrage against religion and the vulgar trade of pornographic works."[29] To give an idea of his targets, among the titles Carpi mentioned there was the amiable "Decamerotic" comedy *Quel gran pezzo dell'Ubalda tutta nuda e tutta calda* (a.k.a. *Ubalda, All Naked and Warm*, 1972) starring Edwige Fenech. Carpi even addressed a personal appeal to the Pope: "I would like him to intervene and put an end to this scandal, caused by vulgar speculators who have sneaked in the Diocesan circuits." A most bizarre initiative, given that, in addition to the aforementioned nudity, *Un'ombra nell'ombra* featured a controversial scene where Lara Wendel (aged 13 at the time of filming) takes a shower in the nude, and ends with Daria heading to St. Peter's Church in Vatican City, presumably to kill the Pope.

Despite Carpi's usual flair for outlandish self-promotion, it is no mystery that *Un'ombra nell'ombra* was only partly shot by him. Several scenes were in fact filmed by Piero Amati, including the opening ballet of the witches, a demented moment which looks as if it was lifted off a Saturday night TV show ballet, were it not for the fact that the voluptuous Carmen Russo appears totally nude. Amati explained: "In the contract that I had with … the financier, it was written that I had to shoot these scenes. And so, I filmed this footage of black masses and things like that.… He had written it as a *conditio sine qua non.* But they turned out to be crap.…"[30]

Predictably, the film was a commercial disaster. And indeed, there is little to salvage—except perhaps the Goblin-like score, signed by Stelvio Cipriani and played by Claudio Simonetti—in such a mess. Still, for one of those unpredictable alchemies of cinema, *Un'ombra nell'ombra* became a cult movie of sorts, and Carpi's best-known work: it was amply distributed abroad in the home video circuit under the title *Ring of Darkness*, and even released to DVD in the States, in a subpar bootleg copy, as *Satan's Wife* (even though a more apt title would have been *Satan's Daughter*…). Carpi consoled himself with the publishing of yet another esoteric-related book, *Testimoni del mistero*

(Witnesses of Mystery), which collected six "stories and dialogues about magic" featuring present-day famous characters (Agatha Christie, Giorgio Strehler, Irene Papas…) to whom the author paired famous historic figures of the past, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, John Dee, Rasputin and Heinrich Schliemann; the most curious pairing is the one between Walt Disney and Jacques De Molay, Grand Master of the Knights Templars. The same year saw Carpi concur among the finalists for the "Bancarellino" prize with the novel *Lady Ginevra*. Albeit with some disappointments along the way, he seemed to be still on top. And indeed, his name would soon turn up again in the headlines, but for reasons totally unrelated to his activity as a writer and filmmaker.

**Italian locandina for *Un'ombra nell'ombra* (1979) (art by Carlo Alessandrini "Aller").**

In spring 1981, the name of Arnaldo Piero Carpi was listed among the members of the Masonic Lodge Propaganda Due (P2), with card number 14. Founded in 1945, Propaganda Due had had its Masonic charter withdrawn in 1976, and had turned into a pseudo-Masonic, clandestine far-right organization. Headed by Licio Gelli, a former Fascist blackshirt who in the 1930s had supported Francisco Franco in the Spanish civil war, had participated in the Italian Social Republic at Salò and had been an active part in the Golpe Borghese, P2 was allegedly involved in many Italian crimes and mysteries, such as the August 1980 bombing at Bologna station. P2 came to light with the investigations after the collapse of banker Michele Sindona's financial empire and a scandal connected with the bankruptcy of the Vatican-affiliated bank Banco Ambrosiano. Investigations proved that the lodge was something of "a state within a state," as its members included politicians, journalists (such as Maurizio Costanzo and Carpi's earlier Cagliostro rival, Roberto Gervaso), entrepreneurs (the most famous being future Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi) and Vittorio Emanuele of Savoy. When the police searched Gelli's villa near Arezzo, in March 1981, they found a document, *Piano di rinascita democratica* (Plan of Democratic Rebirth), which planned a secret *coup d'état* aimed at restoring a dictatorial regime in the country through the limitation of freedom of press, suppression of trade unions, and the rewriting of the Constitution, as well as the list of the 962 members of P2, released to the press by the government on May 21.

When interviewed by the renowned journalist Enzo Biagi, Carpi denied being affiliated to P2, and claimed that his name had been added to the list of members without his knowledge, by his "great friend" Licio Gelli. Indeed, he was actually very close to Gelli since at least a decade, when he first got in touch with Prince Vittorio Emanuele. After Gelli's escape to Switzerland, Carpi kept in touch with him by letter, and during the Venerable Master's hiding he celebrated him as "the new Cagliostro," never missing an opportunity to defend him, verbally and on paper. In his interview with Biagi, for instance, Carpi claimed that Gelli's escape to Switzerland had been permitted by the government, and uttered some cryptic messages to the audience, claiming that "Inquisitors sooner or later end up at the stake." In 1982 he published *Il caso Gelli: la verità sulla loggia P2, parla Licio Gelli con documenti inediti*. (The Gelli Case: The Truth on the P2 Lodge, Licio Gelli Speaks with Unpublished Documents.) "He has written this book because he considers himself one of the few still capable of being honestly indignant and he has no communication with nor esteem for the Italian political and intellectual world," Carpi described himself in the cover's fold, writing in the third person. In the foreword, the writer pointed out: "I used documents, facts, and aspects, as well as my own patient research, to tell the truth. I tried to be objective, but I will surely be accused of having been partial on more than one occasion. I admit it, but with good reason. Always, when I was convinced of it. However, I must be acknowledged that I have the honesty to admit it, in a country that is full of charlatans who disguise as objectivity the most biased picking."[31]

Driven by outrage, Carpi even founded an "International Committee of Solidarity" for the defense of human rights, named "Abraham Lincoln," located in Switzerland and headed by the elusive Gabi Bohortsik, but with Carpi's own residence as the Italian representative. The writer appointed himself in charge of public relations. The Committee mailed a brochure titled *Fratellanza massonica* (Masonic Brotherhood) as well as copies of *Il caso Gelli* around Italy: curiously, the recipients all appeared to be members of the P2 Lodge. The Venerable Master himself thanked him for his stance "against the 'clique' responsible for the organization of the Olympics of lies and deceit," and asked him to "set up a plan to fight back through a media campaign, filled only with right and true ingredients, to accelerate the way to the victory of Justice."[32] That is what can be read in a notorious letter dated February 1983, sent from Switzerland, intercepted and published by the weekly magazine *L'Espresso* after Gelli's escape from the prison of Champ Dollon, and which—before it was discovered that the "dear Piero" addressed by Gelli was precisely Carpi—had caused a fuss in the government, to the point that the secretary of the PSDI (Italian Democratic Socialist Party) Pietro Longo, Minister of the Economic Balance in Bettino Craxi's first cabinet (and in turn a member of P2, with card no. 926), had felt the need of a public apology, specifying that he was *not* the recipient of Gelli's letter.[33]

In the letter, the Venerable Master alluded to an elusive memorial, which had troubled editorial vicissitudes. With Gelli still on the lam, Carpi got in touch with the Neapolitan publisher Pironti: the meeting took place in ways more akin to a spy movie, in a villa somewhere near Bologna. Carpi asked for an 8 million *lire* advance, which he claimed would go to charity. Pironti paid the sum in cash, but on the way back to Naples, leafing through the manuscript, he realized that the content was not the explosive,

revelation-ridden material that he had been promised, but a pedantic self-defense, with little to no names and facts. In short, a cheat. Pironti got in touch with the Ansa press agency, and gave it the memorial for free, refusing to publish it himself.[34] It would be Carpi's typographer friend, Ivo Zarotti, who finally brought the volume to bookstores, in 1993, with the title *Il venerabile* (The Venerable).

The mark of P2 was a considerable weight over Pier Carpi's career. During Gelli's lam the police intercepted Carpi's phone, searched his house and even incriminated him for aiding and abetting: according to the investigators, the "Abraham Lincoln" committee was a front for an attempted reconstitution of the Masonic Lodge. In such harsh times, Carpi tried to stay afloat as best he could, and proved he hadn't lost his habits by denouncing yet another plagiarism of his work, with the help of compliant press agencies: this time the target was the TV documentary *Il primo (grande) amore* (The First (Big) Love), allegedly traced on his 1977 radio broadcast *Primo amore* (First Love), in which celebrities talked about their "first time."[35] In November 1983, speaking with the newspaper *Il Giornale*, he claimed to have been considered for nomination for the Nobel Prize in literature[36]; however, the Swedish Academy eventually changed its mind, and during the Eighties Carpi's literary production slowed down, mostly because of the legal issues which had scorched the earth around him. Publishers regularly rejected his manuscripts, and it was only in 1988 that a new book signed Pier Carpi appeared on bookstores: *Il diavolo: i riti, i sabba, gli esorcismi, tutti i segreti e i patti satanici* (The Devil: Rites, Sabbaths, Exorcisms, all the Secrets and Satanic Pacts).

## *From Fame to Oblivion*

Although he tried to have the press (and perhaps himself as well) believe otherwise, Pier Carpi's career as a filmmaker was over. In the mid–1980s, the news of an impending movie titled *San Francesco peccatore* (Saint Francis the Sinner), a co-production with Austria and the United States starring Anthony Quinn, Valentina Cortese, Lydia Alfonsi and Max von Sydow, and based on documents taken from the Vatican's secret archive, was a bait that fooled no one. Especially since Carpi spoke of a gimmick halfway between William Castle and Werner Herzog's 1976 film *Herz aus Glas* (a.k.a. *Heart of Glass*), impossible for anyone to take seriously. According to the writer, a team of scientists, "making use of the lights, gestures, words of the actors in the first thirty seconds of the film, will be able to hypnotize the audience—70 percent of it completely, the rest in a state of semi-hypnosis."[37] The team of hypnotists would be led by Professor Guido Crapanzano Munaron, another name that came out during the P2 investigations together with the President of the Accademia dei Bardi, Bruno Rabajotti. Munaron was another one-of-a-kind character: formerly known as "Guidone," he had been a pioneering rock 'n' roll singer and a recording artist for Clan Celentano, the record company founded by Adriano Celentano, with the 7-inch single *Tu lo sai* (1962). He allegedly was the interpreter for the Beatles during their 1965 Italian tour, and after retiring from the scene he became a copywriter, an expert in numismatics and, you guessed it, a hypnotism scholar.

The 1990s were a tough decade too, and Carpi's name turned up every now and

then in half-hidden sidebars in newspapers. He got closer again to the movie business, albeit only marginally, when he co-signed with Memé Perlini the script for *Il ventre di Maria* (Maria's Belly, 1992), directed by Perlini and based on a story by Carpi's wife Franca Bigliardi which had won a competition for unpublished manuscripts held by *L'Espresso*.[38] It was yet another rereading of the Gospels in a contemporary key: Maria (Agnese Nano) rides a bike and lives in the Roman neighborhood of Ostia, in a shed on whose walls can be read such slogans as "*Palestina libera*" (Free Palestine) or "*De Michelis vacci tu nel Golfo* (De Michelis, You Go to the Gulf)."[39] Jesus is a shy little kid, who is laughed at and stoned by his peers (at one point, understandably annoyed, he turns one to stone for retaliation), and molds clay birds that miraculously become alive. There is even a wedding scene taken almost verbatim from *Povero Cristo*, among remains of food and Coca-Cola.

*Il ventre di Maria* stirred some controversy because of Agnese Nano's nude scene—or rather, it was Carpi who tried to raise a scandal, claiming to the press to have asked Cardinals Oddi and Ruini to give their consent to the film, and publicly demanding that Perlini remove the offending scenes.[40] The usual stuff, which did not help the film's commercial fate: the first official screening in Turin was, according to the reports, a missed scandal. Carpi declared in despair: "The Catholic world has left me alone!" whereas the spokesman for the Archbishop curtly commented: "These days we have other things to worry about."[41] Lots of water had passed under the bridge from the days of Jean-Luc Godard's *Je vous salue, Marie* (1985).

Pier Carpi's other projects as a director fell on deaf ears. In 1992, he announced a TV series in 20 installments based on his 1980 book *La banda Kennedy*, to be filmed in Turin, which would also be converted into a two-hour theatrical film. Carpi's view on the story: JFK had given the order to plant the bomb that caused the plane crash where the president of ENI (the National Fuel Trust) Enrico Mattei died in October 1962; Jackie knew who did kill her husband but remained silent; it was Lee Harvey Oswald alone who pulled the trigger in Dallas, hired by the Teamsters union. The article reported that 150 actresses auditioned for the role of Marilyn, and would be examined by a jury formed by Valentina Cortese, Memé Perlini and Carmen Russo.[42] In conjunction with the publishing of *Il venerabile*, in 1993, Carpi revealed that an upcoming Hollywood adaptation was in talks, on a budget of 35 million dollars, to be directed by Francis Ford Coppola and starring Sean Connery. Coppola neither confirmed nor denied.[43]

In 1994 came the news of a film project on the Monster of Florence, the sexually obsessed serial killer (or killers?) who murdered eight couples between 1968 and 1985 in the countryside near Florence. In 1993 four local men had been arrested, charged and convicted of the crime: the main suspect was a 68-year-old peasant, Pietro Pacciani. The trial started in 1994, ended with Pacciani condemned to a life sentence; he would be acquitted in appeal in 1996. A new appeal trial was set up, but Pacciani died in 1998, before the second trial could begin. The trial had a great resonance abroad as well, and even the renowned novelist Thomas Harris attended the hearings. Carpi's take on the subject was once again countercurrent. "What interests me the most about Pacciani is especially the human drama. I don't want to write a *giallo* with murders, but the story of that poor wretch, semi-illiterate, whom I believe is innocent, turned into a monster

by the press." And he added: "The movie could start with a scene I saw on the news: Pacciani passes before the reporters, covering his face with a newspaper, when someone takes the cover off to shoot the flash of a camera at his bare face."[44] Proof that, if his imagination galloped, Carpi's spirit of observation was still vigilant.

But what was cinema according to Pier Carpi? The answer is in a pamphlet, *Il cinema che non è mai nato. Analisi teoria e pratica per la nascita del vero cinema* (The Cinema That Was Never Born. Analysis, Theory and Practice for the Birth of True Cinema), printed in 1993 by a small publishing company based in Parma, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Venice Film Festival: just 30 pages preceded by a note penned by the ineffable Crapanzano Munaron. Carpi's provocative thesis is that cinema is not dead; on the contrary, as an artistic expression, it was never born, because it employed a traditional language and narrative structures, taken from other forms of art. Carpi openly criticizes Fellini, Truffaut, Elia Kazan (whose Actors Studio "provided grotesque neurasthenics, winks and ham actors, but only did damage to cinema") and even Carmelo Bene ("In the movies, such a genius did not produce anything") but professes admiration for *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961, Alain Resnais), and vaguely speaks about the necessity of building a theory on which to invent cinema from scratch. According to the author of *Povero Cristo* the basic error, onto which all the others follow, is the necessity to tell a story, whereas "one must renounce the narrative element instead."

In Carpi's utopia of utter freedom, true cinema "must start from Picasso and Pound, not from Achille Beltrame's illustrations."[45] It must break free from the constraints of the film industry, return to craftsmanship, and be able to shape a figure of director-demiurge-alchemist, "the one person to operate on the film in a creative way," and the only owner of the work. Certain observations—the director has now become a technical executor in commercial cinema; the secondary role of music, reduced to "lowbrow accompanying service"; the rising of production costs and the ensuing necessity of more conspicuous grosses; the need to find alternative distribution routes given the imminent disappearance of theaters—are indeed witty and ahead of the times. Others, such as the idea of "open work," draw from themes that were almost three decades old. And the author's modest proposal at the end of the booklet—film as a single work for a single recipient, or to be exhibited in museums—loosely follows the sirens of video art.

In the mid–1990s Pier Carpi resumed his activity as a comic book writer, thanks to the help of his old friend Alfredo Castelli, who called him to co-write a story for the comic book *Zona X*, *Dietro le quinte* (#9, January/April 1995) as well as a couple of issues (*L'eredità dei Teutoni* and *Il volto di Orfeo*, respectively #160 and #161, July/August 1995) of the cult comic *Martin Mystère*: the eponymous character is an archaeologist inspired by Indiana Jones, and the stories often deal with the world of the occult and esotericism, Carpi's favorite themes. These would be his last works in the comics. Around that time Carpi collaborated to the right-wing weekly satirical magazine *La Peste* and briefly resurfaced on the political limelight. A sympathizer of the Lega Nord party, in 1995 he founded (the leopard cannot change its spots…) the committees "For Irene" in support of the then-President of the Chamber of Deputies, Irene Pivetti, which would reach sixty in number all over Italy.[46]

But times had changed, readers were increasingly savvy, and the agency news had

less and less grip. Carpi retired to his homeland, in the Po Valley: he founded a Theosophical Group located in Reggio Emilia, established the Viadana Literary Prize in 1996, and finally published *Gesù contro Cristo*. He died unexpectedly, in June 2000, after a heart attack, at only 60. His widow, Franca Bigliardi, tried to preserve his *oeuvre* and memory, by cataloguing and republishing his works through a Study Centre, and accused the city of Viadana to have betrayed the promise to carry out a proper burial for her husband and help her financially. In 2008 Bigliardi moved to the province of Reggio Emilia, and died there in May 2016, at the age of 77.

About two decades after his demise, the most outspoken memory of Arnaldo Piero Carpi comes from Alfredo Castelli. "He could be very dull, he had crazy fantasies, he thought he was Cagliostro.... But he was definitely a brilliant person. A pity, because if he hadn't had such delusions, he could really become quite an important figure. He was quite good in his field. But he was fooled by his own delusions.... If Carpi had worked with other publishers as well, and perhaps if he had not always acted so as to alienate everyone ... maybe.... He would really have become someone. He had been endowed by the Almighty with a multitude of qualities, and he threw them away...."[47]

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## Pier Carpi—Essential Filmography

1975 *Cagliostro* (S, SC)
1975 *Povero Cristo* (D, S, SC)
1979 *Un'ombra nell'ombra* (D, S, SC)
1992 *Il ventre di Maria* (S, SC)

# 2

# Alberto Cavallone—The Wild Eye of Excess

He was one of Italian cinema's best-kept secrets. During his career as a film director he was ignored, misunderstood, often ridiculed, and he stubbornly pursued a path that led him from commercial success to obscurity and ghettoization. He started as an *enfant terrible* of erotic cinema and ended up tossing off hardcore porn. An eccentric, anarchic, cultured yet extremely unorthodox, undisciplined, even self-destructive filmmaker, Alberto Cavallone has always been—as he himself used to say—an extreme figure in the realm of the Italian movie industry: too intellectual compared with the majority of genre cinema, too interested in sexual and violent themes to be considered seriously as an *auteur*. This was as much a vocation as a precise choice:

> To be extreme, to me, means to be a-normal, that is outside the norm. Norm is deadness, staticness, a passive acceptation of the existing world. Norm is immoral because it wants to be moral. Norm denies universal ethics. Being normal means not evolving, but just accepting what protects the mechanisms of life. Anormality means desire of progress, it's a quest and a challenge. It's the discovery of new ethics and morals, adequate to the changes that are denied by rules.[1]

## *The Man with the Camera*

Alberto Cavallone was born in Milan on August 28, 1938. His parents, Albina Rovelli and Giulio Cavallone, got married only six months earlier, on February 14. Alberto was raised in a bourgeois family, and moved his first steps in show business on stage, as assistant director at the Milanese theater *Il Piccolo*, then in advertising, where he tried his hand at directing and editing TV ads. But soon his interests gravitated toward cinema.

Very little is known of Cavallone's early works, which are sadly impossible to view today. His first known film is *La sporca guerra* (The Bloody War), a 50-minute long documentary featurette on the Algerian war of independence, shot in 16mm, with a voice-over commentary by the renowned writer Giovanni Arpino and a score by Pino Donaggio, and made with the financial help of Communist writer and politician Davide Lajolo. "I was 17 when I shot it," Cavallone recalled. "I asked my grandmother to tell my parents that I was on holiday with friends, while I was shooting. I arrived in Tunisia with my 16mm Paillard camera, and then entered Algeria."[2] Although the director claimed to have shot the film in 1958, according to other sources, such as the magazine

*Cinema Nuovo*, shooting started as late as 1960, but the making was long and troubled. The director himself recalled being in Paris when the OAS bomb attack at the house of André Malraux took place, in February 1962.

Since the beginning, Cavallone was a non-aligned spirit: *La sporca guerra* was openly critical toward the French Communist party, because of its responsibility in the election of Charles De Gaulle. The tight and sharp editing, which proceeds by analogies, juxtaposes footage of Algerian faces and places, Nazi rallies, close-ups of De Gaulle, piles of corpses, extermination camps, tortures. Accordingly, the young director found collaboration from the Cinema Institute in Warsaw, the United Arab Republic (a short-lived political union between Egypt and Syria which lasted from 1958 to 1961), and the National Liberation Front of Algeria.

The movie was screened only in late 1963 at the 4th "Premio dei Colli," the festival of Film Inquiry at Este, in the region of Veneto. It was not well received. The renowned critic Giovanni Grazzini complained about its good ideas being "drowned in a clumsy pacifist demagoguery," adding: "It is nevertheless singular that such works exude one of the strongest preoccupations of Communist politics: for the most part these films are not aimed at proselytizing, but at strengthening the faith of the more tepid militants."[3] Cavallone's interpretation was quite different, as he later claimed that the Communist party was dissatisfied with Arpino's commentary, and one sentence in particular ("You won't save your soul by saying "No" to death, to fear, and then voting "Yes" for those who are burying freedom") caused a small controversy and resulted in the film having a practically non-existent circulation.

All that is left today of *La sporca guerra* is the 4-page transcription of Arpino's commentary published in the heavily-politicized film magazine *Cinema Nuovo*. The text is characterized by a sneering, sarcastic tone, with such passages as "Civilization doesn't bring words anymore, now, but bombs," and "Everybody knows, everybody stays silent. U.N. is like Pilate, it is the gigantic, bureaucratic monument to world alibis." The introduction, not signed, mentions that the director had already made "several documentaries on programs and topics of interest, from D'Annunzio to the tragedy of Vajont and the "boom" (in its impacts on "free time")),"[4] but unfortunately there are no other bits of information available on those elusive works. In Este, the director also presented another documentary, *Ultimo spettacolo ore 21*, "about the difficulty of living in a city like Milan," which received some praise. Critic Gianni Rondolino wrote that it was "made with modern technique and not devoid of intelligent stylistic ideas and a certain visual fascination."[5] Absent from all Cavallone filmographies, today it is impossible to find, just like *La sporca guerra*.

A similar fate awaited the director's feature film debut, a semi-documentary feature titled *Lontano dagli occhi* (Far from the Eyes), described by Cavallone as the story of a left-wing reporter for the newspaper *L'Unità*, Sandro Giudici (Paride Calonghi) who travels to Frankfurt in order to write a piece on the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials against former Nazi officers for their acts against humanity such as concentration camps and the use of Zyklon B in gas chambers. He meets a friend, an "expert in public relations" for a big firm, and an ex-lover, Hanna, who is now hospitalized in a clinic. The journalist is openly critical about the trial, which, he says, "looks like the discussion of a budget. They all look like accountants."

All that is left of the film was apparently a typewritten script with penned corrections, as well as a 7" 45rpm vinyl with two tracks from the score by Lino Patruno and Gianni Sanjust ("Non ci penso più" and "Lontano dagli occhi"), released by CBS. Film historians usually dated the film 1962, according to the director's claims. Cavallone said he wrote a first draft of the script in 1962 with Sergio Lentati and Massimo Magri, but Lentati's recollections date it over one year later, as the latter recalled that it made references to the 1963 JFK assassination. The 7-inch is also dated 1964: the front cover features four stills from the film, and the back cover gives away further details, such as the name of some players (Simone Senator, Ornella Sannoner, Arturo Corso, plus Lentati and Patruno). Finally, and most importantly, the Frankfurt trials ran from December 20, 1963, to August 19, 1965.

The footage of the Frankfurt trials—the first trials against the Nazis to be celebrated in Germany before a German court, with an enormous echo in the press—was shot clandestinely, with a 16mm camera hidden in a bag; according to Lentati, Cavallone planned to add a few more scenes that were probably never filmed due to lack of funds. The first would be a meeting between Sandro and a priest in Dachau, in which the clergyman delivers such lines as "Man is violent and is afraid to die. To keep death away, he kills his neighbor." The other would have Sandro go to bed with a stripper. The ending, as described in the script, has a close-up of Sandro, who has become more and more disillusioned about his report, become gradually overexposed, until it looks like a highly contrasted photograph. Then even the borders of the image disappear in blinding white.

As with other Cavallone works, however, things are not so simple as they seem at first glance. In fact, at Rome's Archive of State there is no documentation for *Lontano dagli occhi,* but there can be found plenty for another title which is strikingly similar to it, also scripted by Cavallone and Lentati and starring Calonghi. The six-page "first script"—which can be better described as a short treatment—bears the title *N come negrieri* handwritten in pen over the original one *"…e la guerra continua."* ("…and the War Goes On"), hinting at a link with *La sporca guerra*.

*N come negrieri* was a low-budget project (with a total cost of only 63 million *lire*; Cavallone would be paid 5 million for script and direction), labeled as a "*film inchiesta*" (film inquiry) on colonialism to be shot in Frankfurt and Cyprus, in black-and-white, with mostly non-professional actors and direct sound, plus interiors in a studio in Italy, for a total of 40 days. The story is almost identical as *Lontano dagli occhi*, and the official papers list exactly the same crew and producers, namely Cesare Canevari and Enrico Colombo's company Nuovo Mondo Cinematografico. The notification of start of production was deposited on April 16, 1964, and shooting would begin on April 30. In addition to Cavallone and Lentati, the papers list Luigi Vettore (as director of photography), Canevari himself (as general organizer and production manager), a couple of cameramen (Eduardo Mariani and Graziano Cappelli) and Gaspare Palumbo as production supervisor. The Milan-based Palumbo would later be the production manager on Augusto Tretti's *Il potere* (1971), and the following year he would produce Giulio Questi's outstanding *Arcana* (1972). Cavallone is also listed as editor, while Lentati would also play a role alongside Calonghi.[6] Still, those involved in the two films, starting with Cavallone and Lentati, *never* mentioned *N come negrieri*.

What is the connection between *La sporca guerra, Lontano dagli occhi* and *N come negrieri*, then? Cavallone likely planned to put together the latter by recycling scenes from *Lontano dagli occhi* and documentary footage from *La sporca guerra*—the extent of either is anyone's guess. In fact, the makers planned to include at least about 20/25 percent of archive documentary footage, an exception to the rule which established its maximum percentage to 8 percent.[7] Some scenes from *Lontano dagli occhi* (a party, the reporter paying visit to a girl in the hospital) would be discarded, while on the other hand Cavallone was to shoot a new ending set in Cyprus. Lentati probably wasn't aware of the director's plans to recycle the footage from his previous projects into a new story, which encompassed not only the Nazi trials but a wider sociopolitical discourse picked from his earlier documentary.

*N come negrieri* starts at the Frankfurt airport, where a man (now called "X") has just arrived. He is a French journalist in town for the Nazi trial. X gets on a bus that drives downtown. The treatment briefly describes the atmosphere of the city: the bus radio is playing an American station, and we get a glimpse of the night clubs, the beer houses, the river Main, the prostitutes on the streets. The authors explain that "all these images must be filmed like X's point-of-view shots and are meant to describe Europe's most American city." As the journalist enters his hotel room, a radio plays a song by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. Then we meet a woman, Y, who works at the trial as an interpreter. X notices her during the hearings, and over the days the two become acquainted. The man asks her to help him as interpreter during a journalistic investigation he is making during the weekends.

X's investigation is summarized by a series of queries he asks to the inhabitants of Frankfurt, of a varied nature. Banal, futile questions rub shoulders with more provocative ones, in a purportedly disorienting alternation:

1. The day the war ended, was it a happy day for you?
2. Do you think Germany could have won World War Two?
3. Do you like sports?
4. Does love have any value to you?
5. Do you think you could love a Jewish man/woman?
6. And a black one?
7. Do you have a car? How many home appliances do you have in your house?
8. What is democracy, in your opinion?
9. Is there any difference between Hitler and Stalin, in your opinion? If so, which one?
10. What do you wish most from life?

Then we meet X and Y again on a boat on the river Main, like two ordinary tourists. They are falling for each other. Unlike the previous ones, the scene is described in detail, and includes a dialogue between the man and the woman, characterized by Cavallone's soft spot for cerebral, awkward Antonioni-like lines. The emptiness of popular sayings is compared to the banality of trivial expressions: when the man says they're "lost in a sea of shit" she replies: "Once I laughed when somebody said certain words. Even earlier, I got scandalized." The director's pessimistic vision is made explicit: "If there was a negro singing his songs, it might look like the Mississippi. I could invite you in the

gambling room. Two guns in my belt or the cheque book in my pocket: nothing changes and time passes, and the world is always the same."

Despite the brevity of the script, *N come negrieri* has its own share of pretentious, self-pitying dialogue that sometimes makes it sound like an imitation of a Godard movie. The journalist describes himself as "an abortion," "someone born wrong," and "a passing tourist in a disgusting world." X and Y eventually end up in bed, and talk, talk, talk: "It's bad to try and look for a sentimental justification to a natural act," is their idea of bed talk. Eventually, in a sarcastic bit of self-reference, X bursts out: "Stop, by God, we're talking too much. Let's do like in French movies: let's just be quiet and look in each other's eyes. That's the same anyway. I'm the director, you're the actress." A man and a woman in love are like a filmmaker and the object of desire filmed by his camera eye, with reality and fiction mixing inextricably: It is an embryonic enunciation of a theme Cavallone will develop in many of his following movies, from *Maldoror* (1975) to *Blue Movie* (1978).

Politics are a recurrent topic. X criticizes German people ("You have made a tragic mistake … you have advertised genocide too much. The world was awaiting big things") and discusses their responsibilities in the war. The film's thesis reprises the bulk of *Lontano dagli occhi*: the trial is only a farce, concocted to wash the Germans' collective conscience clean, and the Nazis under accusation are only the product of a system which turned genocide into a moral principle in defense of its own freedom; therefore, the prosecutors should be themselves among the defendants as well. One wonders whether Cavallone had been influenced at least indirectly by Hannah Arendt's book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, published in February 1963 but released in Italy in October 1964, a few months after the writing of the script. Perhaps he had followed the International controversy upon its release, as the story draws from Arendt reporting on Eichmann's trial—which began in April 1961—for *The New Yorker*, and the film's discourse seems to be following the concept of "banality of evil."

Furthermore, through the words of his main character, Cavallone openly addresses a journalist's moral responsibility when reporting on the atrocities witnessed: "Since I was a kid I told myself, I'll be a journalist. To see life, and understand it. The first thing they teach you is objectivity; you must be objective, photograph reality and report it. You must inform, not influence." But X's crisis before the Nazi trial makes him lose grip on his mission: should he just report the facts or add his own opinion, the answers that he thinks he has found?

> The truth is, if you start thinking, you realize it's all a big mess. In Frankfurt, they put the Nazis on trial, they speak of horrors and crimes: "Let's all say together, no more, and love each other." In Frankfurt there's the trial, in Angola they burn villages with women and children, in Genève they discuss disarmament, in Sahara they drop atomic bombs, in Brazil the military make and unmake governments, in Cyprus they shoot. Cyprus is important, it's a strategic base, and soon there will be Persia, with its oil, its misery and Farah Diba visiting hospitals. Long live the mess! You're a journalist, you must be happy, for you the situation is good, there's no lack of work, and your objectivity is well-paid.

Eventually X and Y separate, as the journalist must leave for Cyprus and another report. X arrives at a United Nations camp in Cyprus. While he walks among the soldiers, a series of flashbacks with archive footage make him revive "the tragic fights that

have taken place all over the world in these last years, and of which X has many times been a direct witness."

*N come negrieri* comes off as a rather awkward project, not the least because of its composite nature, but the grim ending is in tune with the pessimistic vision that would come to the fore in the following years:

> Now X is in the middle of a completely deserted square. In a quick editing X's walk is interspersed with Kennedy driving through Dallas and Gandhi walking in New Delhi.
>
> From an unspecified point in the square a gunshot is fired, which hits X in the chest: a quick edit follows of the moment of Kennedy and Gandhi's killings.
>
> The image of X's body in the middle of the empty square dissolves on an advertising short for a non-existing product, for instance a toothpaste, with beautiful women and many, many empty and useless catchphrases.
>
> THE END

It is a bold ending, which predates similar ones, either Italian (Francesco Rosi's 1976 adaptation of a Leonardo Sciascia novel, *Cadaveri eccellenti*) or foreign (Stanley Kramer's *The Domino Principle*, 1977), and which gives the movie a much-needed sting in the tail. *N come negrieri* contains the staples, the weaknesses and the contradictions of Alberto Cavallone's cinema: the mixture of explicit political discourse and commercial compromises; the references to the *Nouvelle Vague*; the resort to documentaristic passages; the heavy reliance on dialogue; the grim portrayal of a detached relationship between the sexes. Besides, the theme of colonialism, which characterizes the last part of the film, with the inclusion of stock footage on the war of independence of the African nations, is a subject common to several of the director's following works.

However, even in its new incarnation as *N come negrieri*, the project was doomed to remain invisible, most likely for economic reasons. On July 12, 1965, Nuovo Mondo backed out, and the new producers were indicated as Albina Rovelli and Enrico Raimondi. Mrs. Rovelli, born in 1912, was the wife of Giulio Cavallone, and Alberto's mother. But *N come negrieri* did not find any distribution either. Anyway, the title is mentioned in the March 19, 2016, issue of the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* (the official journal of record of the Italian government) as part of the list of distributor Euro Immobilfin. The worldwide rights are held by Variety Communications, as *Slave Traders*: no director is listed and it is merely described as "film inquiry." Sadly, though, it remains unseen to this day, and, besides the original script for *Lontano dagli occhi* and the Archive of State material for *N come negrieri*, the only direct testimonials about its cinematic value are Cavallone and Lentati's words. The latter was adamant that the style recalled both the *Nouvelle Vague* and Antonioni, and mentioned a scene—shot in a white room, with white sheets, and a pale girl all dressed in white—referring explicitly to *La notte* (1961).

Playing a small role in *La notte*—the nymphomaniac patient at the clinic—was a young actress born in Milan in 1941, Maria Pia Luzi. After a few roles in such films as *I pianeti contro di noi* (1962, Romano Ferrara) and *Gli imbroglioni* (1963, Lucio Fulci), in 1963 Luzi became a popular TV announcer. Is she the "Maria Pia Giordan" who is listed in the production papers of N *come negrieri* for the role of Y?[8] It might well be. She and Cavallone met in early 1965, during the Carnival (a festive season very dear to Cavallone, who included footage of its typical circus-like masked parades in his films), during the making of a TV ad, and fell in love immediately. They got married in the

summer of 1965, and on April 8, 1966, she gave birth to their son Giulio. Luzi would appear in all of her husband's films until *Spell* (1977) with the pseudonym Jane Avril.

Maria Pia and Alberto planned to make their first film together in mid–1965. Cavallone had been struck by Marc Saporta's novel *Composition No. 1*: published in Italy in 1962, it was the first ever "book in a box" with loose pages, leaving it up to the reader to decide the order in which to read it, and therefore change the story's chronological order and meaning at will, making it a hypertext before its time. He had concocted a screenplay adaptation that rejected the rules of storytelling for a similarly loose, deconstructionist approach, possibly influenced by the experimental narrative of *L'année dernière à Marienbad*. The film would be composed of 10 interchangeable reels, each 300 meters long (or 20 reels, each 120 meters long), which could be assembled according to the projectionist's will, giving way to different combinations at each screening. Cavallone went to Paris to meet Saporta, and at first the project would involve Laurent Terzieff and Gian Maria Volonté, but no producer wanted to have anything to do with such a crazy idea. According to Luzi, at a certain point the movie was to be shot in Ethiopia with Gian Maria Volonté and Corrado Pani, but never got made due to lack of agreement between the Italian and Ethiopian production companies."[9] Cavallone was fascinated by the work of the Istanbul-born French avant-garde writer and essayist Saporta, the French translator of Kerouac and Hemingway, and a pioneer in cut-up techniques. Ten years later he was still attempting to find a producer for his project, but to no avail.

1966 saw Cavallone helming *Z2 Operazione Circeo*, a made-for-TV *musicarello* (a term used to label the unpretentious comedies starring popular singers or bands from the period, which comprised several musical numbers interspersed in the story) commissioned to the director by RAI and the record company Messaggerie Musicali. It featured lots of popular Italian and foreign artists: Gianni Morandi, Sergio Leonardi, Orietta Berti, Alice and Ellen Kessler, Sergio Endrigo, Marianne Faithfull, Ricky Shayne, Gene Pitney. Set mostly in the Circeo area, *Z2 Operazione Circeo* is built around a paper-thin premise which apes spy movies of the period (as does the title itself): Special Agent Z2 (Luciano Rossi, doing his best 007 impression) must stop a foreign spy, Agent S117 (Fiorella Battaglia, who later became a renowned hotelier in the area), who is about to take possession of a microfilm with the plans for a "superbomb," on behalf of the mysterious Circeo. The various musical numbers, little more than scenes of the singers performing in various environments, are tied together by gags ranging from childish (Z2 answers the phone but picks up a bottle of shaving foam instead, with predictable results) to outright bizarre (S117 has a weapon that turns men into ducks or fish), shootings, an awkward fight scene, and a surreal ending. Cavallone pays homage to Ursula Andress emerging from the waters in *Dr. No*, and often keeps the songs in the background of the action, resulting in a weird, at times self-sabotaging concoction. The one-hour long film was broadcast on TV only once, on October 13, 1966, and vanished into obscurity for almost fifty years: it was recovered from the RAI archives only in the early 2010s. Even though it carries Cavallone's name in the credits, there are rumors that it was directed by Oscar De Fina, who during that period collaborated with other Milan-based filmmakers such as Cesare Canevari; the print is in black-and-white but, as the credits state, it was shot in Eastmancolor.

As proven by *Z2 Operazione Circeo*—no doubt a work-for-hire—the only way for the young director to keep making movies was to relocate in Rome. There, in addition to shooting advertising shorts (broadcast in the popular daily prime time program *Carosello*), he worked as an assistant to renowned scriptwriter Ennio De Concini. Some of his efforts were uncredited, while other scripts included Duccio Tessari's musical fantasy *Per amore ... per magia* (For Love ... for Magic, 1967), Nino Zanchin's *La lunga sfida* (1967; the original script was titled *Per l'oro di Ketama (la lunga sfida)*), and Mikhail K. Kalatozov's *The Red Tent* (1969).

In early 1968 Alberto Cavallone finally managed to get behind the camera again. It was a favorable period for young filmmakers, with many new names surfacing in the movie industry, and the 30-year-old director approached his new project with a good deal of ambition. In interviews, he claimed that his was "a new attempt at film language and image,"[10] and explained that his purpose was "to visualize, both in the words and the psychology of the three main characters ... the contrast between different worlds and mentalities."[11]

Cavallone had started working on the script in 1967, with Sergio Lentati: the first draft had a more explicit political tone, whereas the finished film was sold as a morbid erotic flick centered on a *ménage-à-trois* between a Swedish-American fashion photographer, Ursula (Erna Schurer), her lover, a black model named Uta (Beryl Cunningham), and psychologist Henri Duval (Antonio Casale, under the a.k.a. Antony Vernon). It was a cheap production, the first financed by the 31-year-old Carlo Maietto, a former photonovel and commercials actor who was starting a new career as a producer,[12] on a budget of only 28 million *lire*. "I absolutely did not need any money," Cavallone recalled. "I was under contract with Vides and earned lots of dough as a scriptwriter. I invested 400,000 *lire*, went four times to Tunisia, and signed a co-production deal with Saftec to cover the French market."

Filmed on 16mm in the North-African country, very dear to the director since the days of *La sporca guerra*, with the indoor scenes shot at the De Paolis

**Italian locandina for *Le salamandre* (1969) (art by Renato Casaro, courtesy Nocturno Cinema).**

studios, the film was born out of the ideological contrasts between Cavallone and Maietto: the director was decidedly left-wing, while the producer had opposite political ideas, and their discussions furnished the ideas for the scenes which the director wrote night after night, right before shooting them. Originally titled *C'era una bionda* (There Was a Blonde), the film eventually became *Le salamandre* (The Salamanders), after the distributor Cidif had backed out. It was picked up by Aldo Addobbati with his company Paris-Etoile, a move that proved winning. *Le salamandre* was released theatrically in Italy on February 26, 1969, the very same day as Tinto Brass' *Nerosubianco*, another movie focused on an interracial relationship. It did surprisingly well at the box office, taking in about 500 million *lire* (better than Jess Franco's *Marquis De Sade's Justine* and Umberto Lenzi's *Così dolce … così perversa*, to name two popular genre movies released the same year), and became a small sensation.

Undoubtedly the evocative, malicious title had a great part in its success, hinting at lesbianism the same way other films of the period did; likewise, the advertising campaign openly exploited the erotic content, taking advantage of the new-found loosening of the censorship. As one article at the time of its release emphasized, "for the first time the definition of "erotic film" has been officially adopted by an Italian production company to indicate the nature of a movie to the theater owners and the audience alike. The company Paris-Etoile … has in fact published its list of movies for the current season in a specialized magazine."[13] Five of the twelve films included in the list were labeled as "erotic," and of course *Le salamandre* was one of them. And indeed the audience could savor such memorably enticing images as the two girls sunbathing in the nude, holding their hands (also used for the poster), and the scene where Ursula paints Uta's naked body with stripes of white paint. Cavallone later claimed: "I believe I have demystified sex as an instrument of the revolution. Many people have lived under the illusion that, by sexualizing to the maximum their films, or novels, or anything else, it would be possible to scandalize the middle-class society and establish a new one. On the contrary, by showing the deep sterility of a relationship that is merely sexual, I believe I gave a hand to understand that sexual freedom is not freedom in the general sense, but just a modest part of it."[14]

Few, however, seemed to notice that, as the director had anticipated, *Le salamandre* was a rather more complex affair: an allegory on colonialism which liberally drew on Frantz Fanon's 1961 book *The Wretched of the Earth*, and on its thesis that any resistance to the colonizer's strength must also be of a violent nature, because this is the only "language" the colonizer speaks. The film opens with an impressive dream sequence, accompanied by a reverberating electronic noise. A black man is chased on a beach by a car; three white men get out and beat him savagely, then cut off his penis (off-screen), while the horrified Uta watches from behind a bush. Then the men start pursuing Uta, whose terrified expression turns into a smile as she sees Ursula on a dune, waiting for her with her arms maternally open. Later on, there is room for one of the director's trademarks, the use of shocking stock footage as a complement to the narration: as Duval shows the two girls a wall that was used for capital executions ("Before this wall we are all murderers"), Cavallone cuts to images of war prisoners being shot point blank by a firing squad.[15]

Such a provocative expedient hints at another influence, the *Mondo movie*, but

Cavallone's spirit is far from Gualtiero Jacopetti's sneering eye, and it is imbued with the director's previous experience as a documentarist, as well as with his love for the *Nouvelle Vague* and the deconstruction of film form. As such, *Le salamandre* deals with elements that will become central in Cavallone's following works. For one thing, the vampiric, master/servant relationship between the photographer and her model will return, this time in an even more extreme form, in *Blue Movie*. In another scene Ursula discovers that a model has committed suicide in her apartment, and set up a camera to take shots as she took a lethal dose of sleeping pills; Ursula impassively develops the negatives, which consist of a series of images that portray the various phases of the woman's suicide ritual. The obsession of an indifferent eye recording death—the main theme of Paolo Cavara's *L'occhio selvaggio* (a.k.a. *The Wild Eye*, 1967)—will become one of the director's favorite themes, culminating in *Maldoror*.

"There was a sort of accusation toward the audience: 'You came to watch this movie just to see two naked women … you have a colonialist mentality. Nothing's changed, the only way to change things is to kill you.'" This is how Cavallone explained the film's ending. In a metafilmic twist, after Uta has stabbed Henri and Ursula to death, the fiction of the set is revealed: a technician pours fake blood over Erna Schurer's body, a clapperboard (featuring the working title *C'era una bionda*) appears on screen, and we hear the director telling his crew to get ready to shoot the alternative ending for the U.S. market, "where the white girl kills the black one…." It is a mocking denouement, which marks the perfect *trait d'union* between Mario Bava's *I tre volti della paura* (1963) and Alejandro Jodorowsky's *The Holy Mountain* (1973).

Stylistically, Cavallone aimed for a bleak, *cinéma-vérité* look, with blinding white exteriors and occasional splashes of bright red: "When Alberto saw the rushes, he told me 'This is not an Esther Williams film. There is way too much color in it! I want the movie to look like stock footage,'" recalled the director of photography Maurizio Centini.[16] Reviewers of the time, while predictably harsh toward the movie, salvaged its documentary-like style.[17] Unfortunately, the film's visual impact is badly let down by the dialogue—most of it written during post-production and credited to Guido Leoni—often annoying and overwhelming, which goes on and on over scenes clearly intended to be dialogue-free in the first place.

Another element in the success of *Le salamandre* were the two leading actresses, the Neapolitan-born Erna Schurer (real name Emma Costantino) and the Jamaican Beryl Cunningham, in her first film role. Schurer, an ex-photonovel starlet who had appeared in the notorious, ultraviolent *Killing*, was Maietto's girlfriend at the time. She became very popular after her roles in controversial films, such as the lesbian-themed *Le altre* (1969, Alex Fallay) and Brunello Rondi's *Le tue mani sul mio corpo* (1970). Cunningham became a short-lived star of Italian erotic cinema, thanks to her roles in *Il dio serpente* (1970) and *Il Decamerone nero* (1972), both directed by her husband Piero Vivarelli. The title itself became proverbial: not only Michel Levesque's *Sweet Sugar* (1969) was released in Italy in 1972 as *L'isola delle salamandre*, but Filippo Ratti's erotic *giallo*, *I vizi morbosi di una governante* (shot in 1973 but released only in 1977) featured a telling in-joke about it. A scene features a titillating party game—the kind which seemed the norm among the upper classes in Italian movies of the period: see *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*—where the guests are mimicking movie scenes, and the others

must guess the name of the film. Two girls (Isabelle Marchall and Patrizia Gori) start kissing each other, much to their companions' amusement. "All movies have scenes like that now," one complains. Then, it is revealed, the mysterious film's title is *Le salamandre*. Cavallone's *succès de scandàle* had become almost a household word—or rather, a synonym for lesbianism in cinema.

With *Le salamandre*, Cavallone became a "hot" director. A producer immediately asked him to make another movie in the same vein, starring Florinda Bolkan, but he refused. His next project, announced in newspapers in early 1969, was *Il paradiso terrestre*, labeled as an "erotic-science-fiction film,"[18] which never got made in the end. The director's following work, the unpleasant *Dal nostro inviato a Copenaghen* (From Our Correspondent in Copenhagen), hit the screens in May 1970: it dealt with an uneasy subject matter—the Vietnam War—and was even less compromising than its predecessor. Cavallone's original script was titled *Ah la bella violenza* (Ah the Beautiful Violence), whereas the working title, which had to be changed upon request from the distributor, was the openly anti–American *Così U.S.A.* (a wordplay on the phrase "*così usa*," literally "that's the way it goes").

The plot revolves around two American soldiers, Nick Valenti (Toni Di Mitri, billed as "George Stevenson") and William Cole (Walter Fabrizio, as "Alain N. Kalsyj"), who desert from the U.S. base in Wiesbaden, West Germany, and hide in Copenhagen, with the help of a member of a pacifist organization. Soon they end up penniless, and Nick gets a job as porn actor, whereas William, haunted by his gruesome war memories, loses his mind and almost kills a woman. Nick entrusts a psychiatrist, professor Borg (Antonio Casale), to cure his friend, but the doctor treats the patient as a guinea pig, and plans to exploit his war traumas in order to gain fame and fortune. Meanwhile, William keeps reviving the atrocities he has witnessed and committed (with graphic torture scenes depicting fingernails being ripped off, villages destroyed and so on), and cannot distinguish between memories and reality any longer.

For all its anti–American grudge, *Dal nostro inviato a Copenaghen* was equally critical toward left-wing ideology as well, as shown by the character of Borg, a bourgeois monster whose progressive ideas are only a hypocritical façade. Cavallone also had a thing or two to say about the rising sex industry as a new opium for the masses. "With sex, people do not think, and believe they are free. We live in a society that's starving for tits!" says a porn tycoon as he prepares for a shoot. Cavallone's take on pornography is sardonic: a kinky lesbian scene, with the two girls titillating each other by having a guinea pig trot along their bodies, is accompanied by the actresses' small talk which underlines their disinterest ("I'm going to buy one of these lovely mice for my kids," says one) and sabotages the eroticism implied in the act. Cavallone would elaborate on the subject in interviews of the period, pointing at the depiction of eroticism and pornography as "an element of sterility of the Western society … in Denmark, the country of free love, society is as hypocritical as in countries where love is not free."[19] It is a symptom of the antagonist approach which the director would maintain when shooting hardcore films himself in the future.

Still, the sociopolitical ambitions are undermined by the overtly didactic dialogue, which sounds as if it was haphazardly added in post-production as a means of tying different scenes together, similar to *Le salamandre*. What is more, the style is still

unripe, filled with unnecessary and sometimes goofy zooms (Cavallone himself admitted: "It looks as if the director had just discovered the zoom lens") and stock footage, and the meager budget shows blatantly in the sequences crudely recreating 'Nam in rural Italy landscapes. The juxtaposition of ordinary Western life and the horrors of war is also overdone: a sex scene has the lovers' whispering "I love you" over battle footage, children playing in the park intercut with laughing Vietnamese children and so on.

On the other hand, *Dal nostro inviato a Copenaghen* shows the director's eye for capturing everyday life with no filters, such as when William stops and harasses passers-by, asking them "Who am I…?," a scene shot candid camera-style. As technically crude and hastily made as it is, at times *Dal nostro inviato a Copenaghen* looks like a non-fiction film when it follows its two main characters as they wander aimlessly through the streets of Copenhagen. And it benefits from a nervous performance by Walter Fabrizio, whose exotic-sounding pseudonym no doubt pays homage to his physical resemblance to Klaus Kinski; speaking of which, Casale's a.k.a. "Antony Vernon" had been chosen in homage to Howard Vernon, according to Cavallone.

Box office results for *Dal nostro inviato a Copenaghen* were very poor: a mere 90 million *lire*. Still, after only two officially released feature films, Cavallone had gained for himself the label of a very peculiar, controversial *auteur*, a "thorn in the side" of Italian critics, as an article/interview in the magazine *New Cinema* called him, adding: "To some, the young Milanese filmmaker is an intelligent helmer of political films, uncomfortable for all the reactionaries and the indifferent, and narrated with a violent and rough style. To others, his work is nothing but a farrago of sexual themes disguised as political commitment."[20] Among the latter, there was the influent film critic Giovanni Grazzini, who on the pages of the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* called *Dal nostro inviato a Copenaghen* a "shameless concoction … a murky porn-politic film, which plays left-wing ideology as an alibi for a tawdry exploitation of the themes en vogue in the most blatant movies." Grazzini concluded: "Cavallone offers us a resounding example of the moral and professional faults that the illusion of saving his soul by inflating his wallet can cause in a director not entirely devoid of qualities."[21]

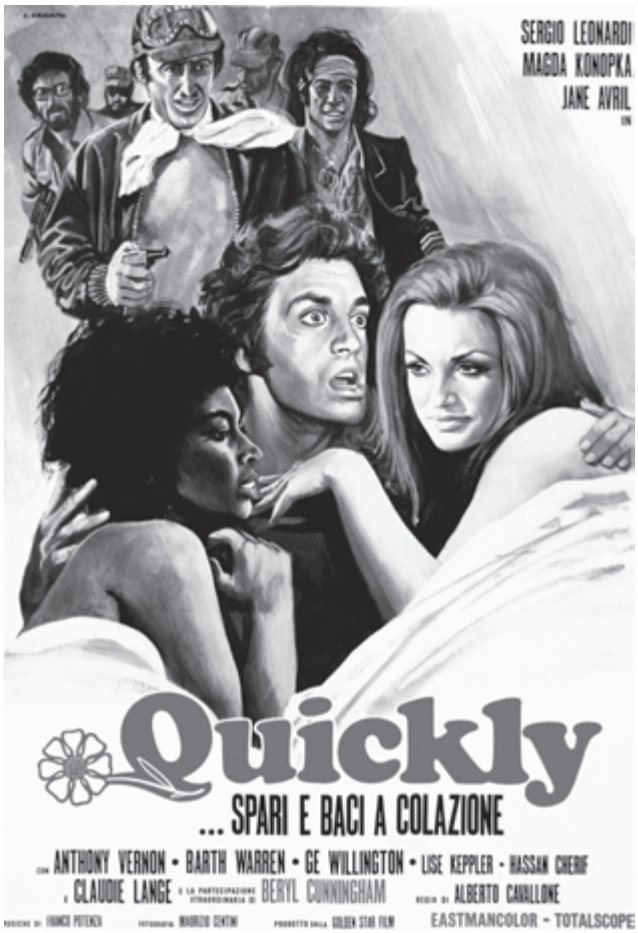
In the *New Cinema* interview, Cavallone seemed intent on building for himself an antagonistic image that mirrored the no-holds barred approach of his works. He claimed: "I'm not interested in poetry. Poetry can maybe come out of my films, but just by chance. What matters is the political question. Cinema, to me, is a way to express political ideas by means of spectacle.… I don't think that one should go to the movies to have fun. When I watch a film, I want it to teach me something, to give me some ideas to discuss."[22] In the interview, the director praised Carmelo Bene, Antonioni and Visconti, adding that *La caduta degli dei* (a.k.a. *The Damned*, 1969) was the only political movie he liked in recent times, whereas he openly criticized Elio Petri's *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto* (a.k.a. *Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion*, 1970). Among foreign filmmakers, Cavallone singled out Jean-Pierre Mocky and José Benazeraf: his wife Maria Pia Luzi had recently acted in the latter's *Le désirable et le sublime* (1969), using for the first time the a.k.a. Jane Avril.

As for his future projects, the director confirmed that, after his take on post–Colonialism, interracial relationships and the Vietnam War, his next film would be about

Italy. "I don't know what kind of movie it will be yet, but I want it to talk about our own problems. In a certain way, this new film will be part of a kind of trilogy where I'll develop themes which are more and more particular."[23] And yet, Cavallone's following movie would be nothing of the above.

## *Deconstructing Genres*

A radical change of pace from *Le salamandre* and *Dal nostro inviato a Copenaghen*, *Quickly … spari e baci a colazione* (Quickly … Shootings and Kisses for Breakfast, 1971) was a demented, postmodernist deconstruction of the heist film with off-screen voices à-la *What's Up, Tiger Lily?* and bizarre cartoon inserts (helmed by Cavallone himself, who also took care of the editing under the a.k.a. "Mister X"), which can be seen as an ideal filiation of *Z2 Operazione Circeo*. According to the director, *Quickly* was originally titled *Follow Me, seguimi nel mondo* ("I never had the chance to keep the titles I had chosen," he complained), whereas the script kept at Rome's CSC is titled *Precipitevolissimevolmente*.[24] It was most likely a smart move, a way to take advantage of his newfound commercial potential to salvage and reuse footage from another incomplete project, the musical comedy *Il ragazzo che fece fumare il Vesuvio* (The Boy Who Made Vesuvius Smoke), possibly dated 1967.




**Italian 2-fogli manifesto for *Quickly … spari e baci a colazione* (1971) (art by Luciano Crovato, courtesy Nocturno Cinema).**

Cavallone was not fond of the script (penned with Guido Leoni and Mario Imperoli), and purportedly overplayed the production's minimal budget. "It was such a rickety film, because it couldn't be born in any other way. Instead of hiding it, I decided to overdo its rickety appearance." The director's peculiar sense of humor is evident from the opening sequence, where a holdup takes place in a deserted village—a leftover set from some Spaghetti Western—

with the gang getting away on motorbikes. The plot revolves around various characters searching for a safety-box where stolen diamonds are hidden (the idea of the stones smuggled inside Marlboro packets predates one of *Blue Movie*'s most harrowing images), and moves at a speedy pace from one absurdist set piece to the other, such as a shootout between the bandits and South American revolutionaries moderated by a traffic cop. With a composite cast—bombshells Magda Konopka and Claudine Lange, singer-turned-actor Sergio Leonardi (who had appeared in *Z2 Operazione Circeo*) and Cavallone regulars Jane Avril, Beryl Cunningham and Antony Vernon, plus the special participation of Cavallone's son Giulio as the little child playing with a grenade in one scene—and a stunning jazzy score by Franco Potenza, *Quickly* was nonetheless a mixed bag: too weird for mainstream audiences, yet decidedly too bizarre for critics of the period to take the director's experiments seriously. In fact, most film critics did not even seem to notice its existence, and so did the audience.

If *Quickly* passed unnoticed at the box office, around the same period Cavallone and Luzi's names made headlines for another initiative, this time only marginally related to moviemaking. The director and his wife opened business in the central Rome neighborhood of Trastevere, in via del Mattonato: formerly a butcher shop with a history of blood (the mysterious death of a butcher who had attempted to rape two 13-year-old girls), the premises became the location of a club, "Rising Workshop—Cinema-Video-Discoteca." It was a multimedia space inspired by a Paris club of the same name: "The door is lighted with a discreet red. The interior is furnished unpretentiously: some posters, some enlarged photographs, cheap armchairs covered in flowered pink. Alcoholics are not allowed. It opens at 9 p.m. and closes at 2 in the morning. The most assiduous customers are young people, students and intellectuals,"[25] a reporter wrote. "One can spend time in different ways: drinking non-alcoholic beverages, listening to underground music, watching screenings of retrospective and avant-garde films, watching on closed-circuit televisions French and American broadcasts on 'videocassettes,' even in color,"[26] another, somewhat snobbish newspaper article explained soon after the official opening.

"Rising Workshop" was indeed a concept ahead of its time, at least for the narrow-minded Italian mentality of the period. Cavallone understood the potential of videotape (which, as the article conceded, "has a very promising future in Italy"): in addition to two screening rooms, "Rising Workshop" gave customers the possibility to rent movies for private projections, long before videoshops began to surface. The movies chosen for the screenings were from the director's own private collection. What is more, starting from February 1972, "Rising Workshop" began to screen a weekly newsreel, recorded on tape, half an hour long, replicated each night on the short-circuit TVs. Cavallone's method in the making of these zero-budget newsreels was the lack of any intervention on the part of the interviewer, in order to avoid any form, albeit indirect or involuntary, of manipulation: a concept inspired by *cinéma-vérité*, and developed by way of a light Akai camera: Cavallone himself would transfer the footage on tape at home, for a minimal cost.

The newsreel was made with the supervision of Sergio Saviane, the TV critic of the weekly magazine *L'Espresso*, who explained: "It was an experiment to prove that you can make television about current affairs with little money."[27] The idea, which

Saviane baptized "*televisione-nana*" (Dwarf Television) raised a fuss: "Think about it, for a start: *Tv-nana* paves the way for group TV, condo TV, family TV.... The initiative has exposed a lack of legislation on the subject ... a small revolution has started from the heart of Trastevere."[28]

Cavallone's next work returned to similar terrain as *Le salamandre*. Decolonized Africa as a modern-day Little Bighorn, white men as General Custer's soldiers: this is how the director described the concept that spawned *Afrika* (1973). It was an uncomfortable, uncommercial premise that shows how little Cavallone cared for commercial issues. The theme was once again the cultural and political clash in a country—Ethiopia—that was experiencing a sort of "new birth" after the end of colonialism. Cavallone echoed the confusion and identity crisis of a whole nation through the private lives of a group of Europeans who chose to hide themselves in the Third World rather than solve their existential problems. The main character, Philip Stone (Ivano Staccioli) is a failed painter who is unable to fully accept his homosexuality, and carries on a miserable life of reciprocal betrayals and bitter recriminations with his estranged wife ("You can't stand the idea that someone loves you. It's too hard for you!" she spits out). Frank (Andrea Traglia), his young secretary and lover, undergoes a sex change operation in an attempt at making their relationship an "acceptable" one. But Frank's rebirth as a woman named Eva becomes a tragic awakening, culminating in suicide.

According to the director, *Afrika* was adapted from a paperback of the same name published by the elusive Edizioni 513. Yet there is no mention of the literary source in the credits, and there is no other trace of the actual existence of this publishing company besides Cavallone's own words; not even the producer, Pier Latino Guidotti, recalled anything about this novel. Once again, close examination of the director's work leads to dead ends and lacunous, or even suspicious, bits of information.

Shot on Super 16mm and then blown up to 35mm, *Afrika* is built around a fragmented, intriguing flashback structure. The bulk of the film takes place immediately after Frank's death, as a local commissioner (Debebe Eshetu, who would appear also in Cavallone's subsequent film, *Zelda*) questions both Philip and Frank's sister Jeanne (Jane Avril) and the main characters' stories gradually come to the surface. Each event is presented under two or three different points of view, each giving more bits of information than the previous one. In one scene, Frank is kidnapped by a quartet of schoolmates (two boys and two girls) and savagely raped in the countryside. We then get to know that the rape was organized by Jeanne's husband (Martial Boschero[29]) in order to make Frank "recover" from homosexuality.

This all sounds much more interesting on paper, though: didactic dialogue and poor performances (especially Traglia's) make *Afrika* a daring yet badly flawed film. It almost looks as if Cavallone gradually got tired of the basic premise and let his inspiration of the moment take the reins. In fact, the best parts are those where the documentarian's eye meets the director's sharp, nihilistic humor. A long scene features a party of healthy tourists—including Philip and his wife (Kara Donati), a blind ex-colonel (Guidotti, credited as "Peter Belphet") and his African spouse, and a good-looking young actor—who make a trip to the countryside, to a small isolated village. There, they buy handicraft objects, and have the villagers kill an ox (onscreen) and set up a banquet in their honor. A woman makes fun of the natives ("Gee, I'm gonna buy you a

dust cleaner for Christmas! So that's why they call it "Black Africa"—because of all this dirt!"), the colonel's wife openly flirts with the actor in front of her unsuspecting husband, and Philip and his spouse play the happy couple while they are actually arranging their divorce. They don't understand Africa, and make a mockery of its traditions and its people. But, somehow, they envy its innocence, something they lost forever, and desperately try to imitate it. Cavallone excels at capturing the characters' desperation and incommunicability, and he takes his risks: some sequences—such as the opening, where Stone watches in awe as a couple of soldiers torture and kill in cold blood two women who are suspected of being rebels, or the aforementioned slaughtering of the ox—critically revise the legacy of *Mondo movies* (such as Jacopetti's *Africa addio*, 1966) the same way Paolo Cavara did in the extraordinary *L'occhio selvaggio*.

What is more, the director is not afraid of dealing with scabrous themes: sex change was something of a novelty in Italian cinema (and that year, Nando Cicero's comedy *Bella, ricca, lieve difetto fisico, cerca anima gemella* alluded to the topic of female-to-male gender reassignment in a grotesque way); similarly, male homosexuality—quite unpopular at the time, whereas genre cinema often depicted lesbian relationships—is developed with no false discretion. The scene depicting Frank's rape (which somehow predates a similar moment in Paul Verhoeven's *Spetters*, 1980) was probably the reason why the film was briefly seized. Reviewing it in the *Corriere della Sera*, film critic Leonardo Autera acknowledged Cavallone's peculiar *auteur* status, and identified the bulk of his work as focusing on "murky stories, built around striving characters, where sex erupts as a demystifying moment of truth," but ultimately judged the film ineffective, mostly because of the tortuous psychologies, the unconvincing acting and the "tendency to indulge in morbid situations."[30] Box office response was moderate, about 250 million *lire*. An English language version was prepared by the producer, with Edmund Purdom and John Steiner dubbing respectively Staccioli and Traglia: it runs only 70' and mercilessly cuts the documentary footage, but it also features a couple of extra sequences which not only enhance the sex and violence quota, but also attempt clumsily to explain the main characters' sexual orientation: an added opening scene depicts Frank and his girlfriend making love near a waterfall; a man comes out of the woods, knocks the boy down and takes the girl away to rape her. When Frank comes to his senses, he finds out that his girlfriend is enjoying the rape, a trauma which allegedly turned him into a homosexual. Another added sequence has Philip revive a childhood trauma, when his father found his wife in bed with a black man, whom he strangled and castrated.

Despite all its flaws, *Afrika* was a further step into no man's land—that is, a cinema that flirted with both intellectualistic premises and genre material, mixing sex, violence, politics and social commentary with uneasy results. It was also something close to a declaration of impotence, on behalf of a filmmaker unwilling to embed his creative demands within a classic (and, more important, commercially viable) narrative format.

## *The Surrealist Years*

Cavallone's next work, *Zelda* (1974), was produced by Giuseppe Tortorella, the brother of politician Aldo Tortorella, a senator of the PCI, Partito Comunista Italiano

(Italian Communist Party) and at that time the editor-in-chief of *L'Unità*. The film was dismissed by its author as a mere commercial exploit, in the lines of the morbid, erotic flicks in vogue at that time. Moreover, it was the first time the director personally shot additional hardcore inserts (for the French version) in order to make the result palatable for the foreign markets. Even though the Italian release didn't feature any graphic sex scenes, *Zelda* was seized for obscenity, but with over 350 million *lire* grossed at the box-office, it became the director's most profitable film since *Le salamandre*. It was even reasonably well received by critics: Leonardo Autera wrote that "the result is neatly intellectualistic, and, besides the meager resources and some excessive redundancies, is rather interesting, and anyway more mature than the director's previous efforts."[31]

As with *Afrika*, the story is constructed as a series of flashbacks originating from a violent death: ex-race car driver Mark Davis (Giuseppe Mattei, credited as "James Harris"), bound on a wheelchair after a failed suicide attempt, and his lover Clarissa (Halina Kim) are found dead in the former's villa. Davis' past, it turns out, is filled with many sexual relationships, all of which lead to the eponymous character, played by Jane Avril: Davis' wife, described as "a dove, a snake and a bitch at the same time."

There are many personal traits in *Zelda*, starting with its title: an evocative, seductive woman's name, which at face value seems a nod to the many exotically-named adult comic books of the period, but which in fact conceals more cultured references. Cavallone pays homage not only to Francis Scott Fitzgerald's wife and muse, but also to the androgynous boy-girl Zelda/Zeldo, in Frederick William Rolfe's novel *The Desire and Pursuit of the Whole* (1909; Rolfe, with his *nome de plûme* Baron Corvo, would cast a heavy shadow over Cavallone's later filmography). But the most blatant literary reference for Zelda's character is the sexually insatiable Simona in Georges Bataille's novel *Histoire de l'oeil* (1928), adapted for the screen around the same time by Patrick Longchamps, starring Laura Antonelli. Similarly to Simona in Bataille's novel, or Lilith in the Bible, Zelda brings her lovers to ruin, and like in *Histoire de l'oeil* the erotic experience is savored mystically, with a desire for self-annihilation and death.

Cavallone's goal was to explore "the crest between life and death, and risk as the salt of existence," once again using sexuality as a way of laying bare his characters' soul. But the result is only partially successful, and suffers from a half-baked plot. Once again, the cast is partly to blame: the blonde sexy starlet Franca Gonella is laughably unconvincing as Zelda's daughter Ingrid, portrayed as a teen girl with braids (Gonella would play a similar role the next year, in Salvatore Bugnatelli's *Diabolicamente ... Letizia*), and Kim—allegedly a post-op male-to-female transsexual[32]—doesn't fare better. Yet the film is shot with a certain elegance: Maurizio Centini's cinematography is more than adequate, and the carefully edited opening sequence shows Cavallone's visual craft and sense of pacing. The many documentary inserts—car race scenes, scuba diving, a flight on a glider—were most likely a way of attaining a reasonable running time (the longest surviving copy is 77 minutes long, and at least 30 percent of it consists of stock footage). Yet they have an unusual, surreal quality, as in the sequence showing a band of horses galloping, in negative, or Davis' flight on a glider; in the Spanish language copy these are accompanied by an evocative synth theme, which replaces Marcello Giombini's original music score.

As usual, sex according to Cavallone is neither oleographic nor sleek. On the contrary,

it is an instrument of power and prevarication: aggressive, disquieting, funereal. In a scene Zelda allusively caresses a flower while she verbally seduces Clarissa, who's sitting naked on a couch; a sex encounter between Ingrid and a black man called Christian (Debebe Eshetu) takes place in a cemetery, on a grave. The epilogue is most astonishing in this respect, as the end credits are superimposed over an orgy lighted in green and red: overhead shots depict hands caressing other bodies, emotionless eyes, painted faces and so on. It doesn't quite make sense, but it is a haunting and fascinating moment.[33] Since the players are not the same as in the rest of the film, and the overall look is quite different, one wonders whether this scene was part of an unfinished project that Cavallone recycled in order to provide a satisfactory ending.

Flawed as it is, nonetheless *Zelda* conveyed an urgency which would literally explode in Cavallone's following film, *Maldoror*, also produced by Tortorella with Mushi Glam, which is considered, by the few lucky ones who saw it, the director's masterpiece, and one of the most experimental, harrowing Italian films of the decade. Following a couple of unfilmed projects with such evocative titles as *E da quel giorno non caddero più ascensori a Parigi* (And from That Day on No More Lifts Fell in Paris) and *Un cattivo orsacchiotto di peluche* (A Bad Teddy-Bear),[34] *Maldoror* was shot in the summer of 1975[35] between Italy and Turkey, and remains the greatest enigma in Cavallone's filmography. It was completed, edited, sonorized and scored, even though Cavallone himself denied it in the 1997 interview published in the magazine *Nocturno*. Maria Pia Luzi claimed that she viewed a complete workprint at Luciano Vittori's labs, and that a copy was privately screened for potential buyers. However, as of today there is no trace of the film: it was never released theatrically, and not even submitted to the Board of Censors. The reasons are unknown: Cavallone mentioned an argument between the producers, actress Sherry Buchanan claimed that the movie was too anti-clerical. What we do have are a description by the director himself in the 1997 interview, plus the recollections of those who worked on the film, including the leading actor Gianni Garko and the director of photography Alessandro Cariello.[36] Thanks to the remarkable efforts of Italian film historian Davide Pulici, more material has resurfaced, namely several stills from the set and even a copy of the script.

The inspiration, as the title tells, was *Les Chants de Maldoror* (The Songs of Maldoror), a prose poem written between 1868 and 1869 by the Comte de Lautréamont (pseudonym of Isidore Lucien Ducasse) and divided in six "chants," which centers on the character of Maldoror, an evil being who renounced all ties to conventional morality and decency. Lautréamont's work was very popular among the Surrealists, because of its iconoclastic power and its violent, macabre imagery. Cavallone followed the poem only loosely, interpolating some of its most outrageous imagery within the story of a film director, Paolo (Gianni Garko) who is undergoing a deep personal crisis. The first part (which Tortorella labeled "mythological porn") is set in Italy, as Paolo is working on a film called *Maldoror*, and focuses on his tormented relationship with a married woman, Monica (Jane Avril). According to the script, extracts from the film-within-a-film, filled with excessive and cruel images, were liberally spliced within the plot, and in their uneasiness, they somehow echoed Pasolini's *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, shot earlier that spring.

Cavallone himself recalled the opening sequence as follows: "The film begins. The screen is completely white.... Then, all of a sudden, a knife rips the screen apart, and a

huge, blasphemous procession comes out. The priest is carrying a giant, phallic cross." Another daring moment, no doubt inspired by similar scenes in Fernando Arrabal's *J'irai comme un cheval fou* (1973) and in Gianfranco Mingozzi's *Flavia la monaca musulmana* (1974), featured a naked woman and a slaughtered cow: "A cow is shot, hung upside down, skinned, its belly is ripped open … and a naked woman comes out of it." Then the woman (played by Maria Rosaria Riuzzi) has a catfight with another woman, whose throat she rips open with a bite. The priest (Piero Mazzinghi) washes her with a water jet originating from the phallic cross, before raping her to death with the same instrument.[37] Other scenes featured Monica breaking eggs on the head of a boy (Cavallone's nine-year-old son Giulio), a soldier stabbing the child with his bayonet, and a communion where the priest slices little kids' tongues and gives them Coca-Cola as a substitute to Holy Wine. According to Cariello as well, the film's openly anticlerical content might have played a part in its disappearance. Some scenes were shot in Viareggio, during the Carnival parade; Cavallone had some girls climb up an allegorical Carnival float and take off their clothes during the parade, of course without any permit, which caused some problems to the production. Other scenes were filmed on the notorious "White Beaches" of Rosignano Solvay.

The second half followed Paolo's journey to Turkey, where he and Monica had spent their happier days together, to scout locations for his film, and his relationship with the cameraman, Walter (Martial Boschero), and an American drug-addicted girl (Sherry Buchanan) they met during the trip. Accordingly, it had a more documentaristic approach, with suggestive scenes such as a Dervish dance in Antalia, and displayed another strong literary influence: *The Savage God—A Study of Suicide* (1971, but published in Italy in early 1975) by Al Alvarez, an essay on the relationship between suicide and literature based on Alvarez's own suicidal attempt, which aimed to explain why and how self-immolation stimulates the imagination of creative individuals—the "Savage God" being Yeats' poetic image for the self-destructive element in Man. The ending, in fact, had Paolo fall to his death (perhaps accidentally, perhaps not) from the top of a hill: when Walter comes to his aid, the dying filmmaker asks him to keep shooting. Significantly, Cavallone's script did bear the title *Il dio selvaggio—Maldoror* (The Savage God—Maldoror), even though the director's hand added the option "*malvagio*," "evil," but the working title was actually *Scava in fondo all'amore—Maldoror* (Dig at the Bottom of Love—Maldoror). Maria Pia Luzi also named *Professione: reporter* (1975) as a possible inspiration, Antonioni being one of Cavallone's main influences since the director's early work, whereas the visionary sequences owed in equal parts to *Sweet Movie* (1974, Dušan Makavejev), *The Holy Mountain* and Fellini. Nevertheless, despite the many visual and thematic references, *Maldoror* was first and foremost a deeply autobiographical project, as shown best by the character of Paolo, a visionary filmmaker who must cope with compromises and ignorant, greedy producers, and whose disillusionment with work is reflected in his personal life.

Once again, Cavallone's two souls—realism and Surrealism—were inextricably tied, even more so in his subsequent work, his best-known (or rather, least obscure) to date, *Spell—Dolce mattatoio* (Spell—Sweet Abattoir, 1977). It was announced by distributor Stefano Film as *Spell, mattatoio incantato* (Spell—Enchanted Abattoir), and advertised as Italy's answer to one of the most controversial films in recent years: *Sweet*

*Movie*. Distributed in Italy in a version curated by Pasolini and Dacia Maraini, and seized for obscenity in January 1975, Makavejev's film returned in circulation after a number of cuts, which involved the most controversial scenes. The cuts were then reintegrated. The distributor's move was significant in more than one respect: on one hand, it played on *Sweet Movie*'s forbidden aura, on the other it acknowledged Cavallone's status as an *auteur* who ideally belonged in the same arena as other "scandalous" filmmakers such as Dušan Makavejev, Fernando Arrabal or Walerian Borowczyk.

*Spell—Dolce mattatoio* passed the censor board with no cuts but a V.M.18 rating, and was finally released on May 20, 1977. After a short run, it was retitled *L'uomo, la donna e la bestia* (The Man, the Woman and the Beast)—"definitely a shitty title, very irritating," Cavallone commented—in order to cash-in on the success of *La bête*. Borowczyk's film, released in Italy as *La bestia*, spawned a number of similarly-themed Italian flicks, such as *Bestialità* (1976, Peter Skerl), *La bella e la bestia* (1977, Luigi Russo), and *La bestia nello spazio* (1980, Alfonso Brescia). Reviewing the film in the *Corriere della Sera*, Leonardo Autera confirmed himself as the most attentive, if far from generous, critic of Cavallone's work:

> Imbued with taboos, but especially with readings of the works of Georges Bataille as well as … the gloomier Freudian and Surrealist mold, director Alberto Cavallone has been pursuing with obstinate consistency, over the last ten years … a thankless theme in which the presence of sexuality, as man's dominant engine, identifies itself with the idea of castration, annihilation, and death.[38]

Whereas in the director's previous films such themes had been developed within a bourgeois context, *Spell—Dolce mattatoio* opts for a distinctly Italian and provincial setting. Cavallone's documentary eye is sharper than ever, and one of the film's outstanding qualities is the way it captures Italy's passage to an era of TV addiction, something the director had understood well ahead of time. On top of that, the surrealistic imagery detonates on screen with outstanding power. *Spell—Dolce mattatoio* is literally filled with the main influences of Cavallone's cinema: Sade, Bataille, Lautréamont, Arrabal, and even Gustave Courbet's scandalous painting *L'origine du monde*—the latter virtually unseen at the time, having been purchased in 1955 by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (it would be exposed at the Musée d'Orsée only in 1995)—which is explicitly reproduced in one scene, a detail which further underlines the director's uncommon cultural roots.

These elements are all part of a dense, multi-layered, anti-narrative mosaic about the crisis of religious and Marxist ideology. In the late '70s, PCI was the second political force in the nation, and the leader of the opposition. The economical-energetic crisis, unemployment, strikes, terrorism led to what many have called the "*annus horribilis*" of insurgency: 1977. Echoes of the 1968 revolts were still strong among students, reverberations of class struggle animated "confrontation," that is the conflict between trade unions and businesses, and many chose armed struggle against political opponents and institutions. In 1977 a few voices within the right were raised to declare the need for an emergency government including the Communists, but the proposal failed. The following year, 1978, the project of the so-called "*compromesso storico*"—a government supported by Italy's biggest parties, Democrazia Cristiana (right-wing, Christian-oriented) and PCI—was to be abruptly interrupted when the premier, and president of Democrazia Cristiana, Aldo Moro, was kidnapped on March 16, 1978, and later murdered by the terrorist group Brigate Rosse.

The main characters in *Spell—Dolce mattatoio* somehow perceive this social and political decline, but do not know how to react to it. The setting—a small country village near Rome, Castelnuovo di Porto, where the director lived—emphasizes this crisis. Conflicts erupt during the annual celebration of the patron saint: this moment of Dionysiac abandon results in betrayal, cruelty, incest, and other assorted pulsions of love and death coming to the surface. The local priest corrupts the kids by giving them picture cards of saints in order to have them sell lottery tickets; a newspaper announces, "Mao is Dead"; a communist photographer (Martial Boschero) confesses his disenchantment with propaganda. "These are just pictures without meaning, hollow images we've been conditioned with. They are like washing powders for our conscience," he says, referring to stills of Vietnamese refugees. It is the symptom of a more general mistrust in the political value of all the instruments that reproduce reality, an inner crisis which mirrors the one suffered by the unnamed reporter in *N come negrieri*. "I haven't yet understood," the photographer says, "if my job is a serious one, if it's got any use to someone or something. I don't know what's more important, reality or its image. Or perhaps we should flush everything down the toilet and find new values—imagination, playfulness, sex."

The photographer tries to escape his existential and political anguish by making surreal patchworks: he glues medical book clippings of body parts over glamorous pictures of models from fashion mags. "Sometimes it's good to see what we're like inside," he says. "All illusions disappear, and what's left is the truth, which is the only medicine to go on." Later on, he puts a picture of Lenin's head over a reproduction of Courbet's painting, which portrays a faceless woman with her legs wide open and her vagina exposed. It seems as if he is playing God, trying to create his own personal world in which he dominates events and dictates the rules. His estranged, crazed wife (Paola Montenero)—who eats her meals in the bathroom and drinks toilet water in a sequence which subverts a famous Buñuelian anti-bourgeois intuition in *Le fantôme de la liberté* (1974)—tries to imitate his gestures in real life, by opening her palm with a kitchen knife and then attempting to cut off her maid's nipple.

Every character in *Spell—Dolce mattatoio* has an idiosyncratic, problematic relationship with both images and eroticism. The prostitute (Monika Zanchi) who lives "at the end of the village" reads porn comics in her spare time; the butcher has erotic hallucinations (he imagines the prostitute lying naked, her legs spread, on a billiard table while he has to "hole out" a ball) and copulates with ox carcasses hanging in the refrigerating room; the bourgeois father lets his incestuous desire loose and gets his own daughter pregnant. The catalyzing element is a homeless young man, who comes out of a cemetery in the opening scene and is, in Cavallone's own words, the director's alter ego: "I was the one leaving the cemetery … with the joyful purpose of upsetting people and putting them in front of a mirror, just to see who and what they really were." Like in Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968), the wanderer brings the community's buried secrets to the surface. To quote André Breton's words on Lautréamont in *L'Anthologie de l'humour noir*, he is "An absolutely virgin eye [that] watches out for the scientific perfecting of the world, disregarding the consciously utilitarian nature of this perfection, situating it with all the rest in the light of apocalypse."[39]

Most importantly, *Spell—Dolce mattatoio* daringly refuses the narrative scheme

of pamphlet, thus avoiding its traps, especially aesthetic. The narrative is fragmented, and carried on mainly through ellipses and analogies, as well as through the "unexpected juxtapositions" between images as theorized by Max Ernst. The director's control of the subject matter is outstanding. His main instrument is the systematic resort to the obscene, in the etymological Latin sense of the term: *obscenus*, ominous. Cavallone's film is very close to Bataille, to the point it replicates the infamous image of the eyeball protruding from a vagina in *Histoire de l'oeil*, in a scene when actress Josiane Tanzilli inserts a bull's eye in her crotch. Bataille's influence (as well as a nod to *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* and *Sweet Movie*) is also evident in the scatological ending, where the intercourse between the wanderer and the madwoman suddenly turns bad, as the woman defecates over her lover's face and literally smothers him to death.

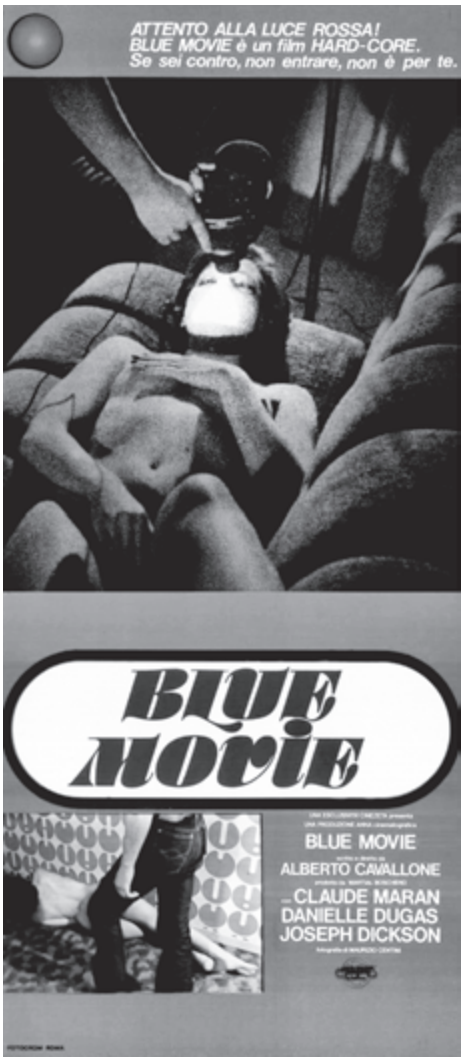
The result was too much even for the more condescending critics. "One is tempted to acknowledge the director's necessity (which should be analyzed psychoanalytically) to express his world, in such an unpleasant way that it rejects the audience's endorsement. But, for the rest, the movie is redundant, clumsy, amateurishly acted and, ultimately, lacking any semblance of style,"[40] Autera concluded his review. In a way, Cavallone's utter refusal of "good style" was a direct consequence of the radicalization of his themes, and his following work would be even more extreme.

Next was *Dream*, to be produced by Rodolfo Putignani's company Cinezeta. Shooting was to start on May 9, 1977, around the time of *Spell*'s release. Two young men, Giorgio and Michele, meet Lucilla, a naive girl who works at the local department store, at a New Year's Eve party. Some time later they show up at her working place and attempt to rape Lucilla in the toilet, near the closing hour. But inadvertently they kill a customer, an old lady. The two men hide in the empty store for the night, and play sadistically with Lucilla as if she was a hunting prey, with the intention to kill her later. But the girl proves more cunning and resourceful than expected: she puts the two men one against the other and kills them. She is then caught by the night warden, who thinks she's a thief; the man offers to let her go if she has sex with him. Lucilla kills him too. Then she leaves the place, in the early lights of dawn.

Cavallone's take on the rape-and-revenge subgenre is an uncompromising little tale full of sex and violence, coherent with the director's vision. The would-be rapists belong to different social classes (one is a worker, the other is a rich law student) and their fury toward the poor girl is described as "a sadistic hunt in the jungle of consumerism, to consume a human being like an object." There are several surrealist touches: Lucilla is forced to wear a wedding dress by her tormentors, which in the end will be stained red with their blood. Besides, the way Cavallone meant to use the department store setting predates Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), as the protagonists plunder the place and take advantage of its many commodities. As with many other female characters in the director's filmography, Lucilla, is a woman who overcomes her submissive role and takes revenge on the opposite sex, but loses her mind in addition to her innocence. Besides the 14-page outline, dated January 1977, little is known about the film: in fact, the papers submitted to the Ministry list the same production team as *Maldoror* (and Sherry Buchanan in the lead) as was the case with *Lontano dagli occhi* and *N come negrieri*. However, in June 1977 the company aborted the project due to lack of the expected funds from the distributor, C.I.A.

The director's next film, completed in August 1977, marked a point of no return. "It is a deliberately pornographic film, but with a political content. A movie about violence as a means of communication and knowledge in a repressive society." This is how Cavallone announced *Blue Movie*, labelling it as "Italy's first "hard-core film" … The characters discuss like in a progressive comic book, shoot, copulate and sodomize, kill and ejaculate in a mixture where everything is dream. The only reality is sex, with its functions pushed to the extreme."[41]

The times were by then mature for such a move. Only three years earlier Alberto Grimaldi's distribution company P.E.A. had unsuccessfully attempted to release eight American hardcore porn films, which were promptly banned by the censors, but in November 1977, in Milan, theater owner and distributor Luigi De Pedys would open the first "red-light" cinema in Italy, the "Majestic Sexy Movie." With the birth of the red-light circuit, sex films were subtracted from general distribution and confined in specialized theaters; as a result, the board of censors became more tolerant toward films which graphically depicted sexual intercourse. The following year, the Constitutional Court limited the crime of "offense to morality" only in the case of "a sexual representation wholly evident and integral." (Sentence no. 2713, October 10, 1978)




**Italian poster for Blue Movie (1978). The line on top reads: "BEWARE THE RED LIGHT! BLUE MOVIE is a HARD-CORE film. If you are against it, don't enter, it's not for you" (courtesy Nocturno Cinema).**

*Blue Movie* was more of a challenge than a rationally planned project: Cavallone claimed that he made the film after a bet with producer/actor Martial Boschero.[42] He worked on a ridiculous budget, shooting in real-life *milieux*, with inexperienced actors and a minimal crew of nine: he completed the film in 15 days, and the whole production and post-production lasted only 45 days.[43] The cast included three male actors, Claudio Marani (billed as "Claude Maran"), the black Joseph Dickson, and Claudio Brusatori (also a one-time director: *Le evase—Storie di sesso e di violenze*, 1978), and three actresses: Patrizia (Dirce) Funari would star in a number of Aristide Massaccesi flicks, including *Le notti erotiche dei morti viventi* (1980), while Leda Simonetti would pop up again in several films over the next few years, including a couple of late WIPs, *Detenute violente* and *Perverse oltre le sbarre* (both 1984),

scripted by Sergio Garrone and directed by Gianni Siragusa. As for Danielle Dugas, this was apparently her only film role.

It took a few months before *Blue Movie* obtained a censorship certificate. The Board of Censors had initially rejected the film, but on appeal the committee opted for a milder judgment, and demanded several cuts, which amounted to a little more than two minutes overall, and basically eliminated all the hardcore stuff. Marani claimed he was replaced by a body double for the sex scenes.[44] On July 8, 1978, accompanied by a striking tagline ("Beware the red light!"), *Blue Movie* hit the red-light circuit, with notable commercial results: box office grosses were about the same as *Spell*, about 230 million *lire*, quite a remarkable sum for a porn film. Cavallone claimed that its success left him somewhat unprepared: "I was bewildered by the box office results. *Blue Movie* was meant to piss off the raincoat crowd, it was such an antagonistic film…." Despite the inclusion of explicit sexual acts, it is indeed hard to imagine something more at odds with the unwritten rules of hardcore porn. The brief sex sessions are jarring and frustrating in the extreme.

The plot looks like a riff on the director's early films. It is the story of the relationship between a photographer, Claudio (Marani), obsessed with the symbols of consumerism, and three women: his victimized model Daniela (Funari), who accepts the role of Claudio's ultimate slave/object; Silvia (Dugas), who suffers from sexual hallucinations of men intent on raping her, and takes refuge in Claudio's house; and a homeless woman, Leda (Simonetti), who accepts Claudio's invitation because she has nowhere else to go. Their lives intertwine and gradually collapse as they virtually isolate themselves from the outside world; the reclusive, puzzling foursome is only sporadically interrupted by the visits of a black gay man (Joseph Dickson) who comes looking for Silvia.

The importance of *Blue Movie* goes beyond its peculiar cinematic qualities. Italian cinema of the late 1970s was a dying animal, and the stench of death pervaded the works of *auteurs* and genre filmmakers alike. On one side, there were *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (possibly the single most important cultural work conceived during the decade, and a chilling prophecy of the country's future), Bertolucci's *Novecento*, Fellini's *Casanova*, Ferreri's *L'ultima donna* (all three released in 1976) and *Ciao maschio* (1978); on the other, the Nazi-erotic thread, the cannibal films, the over-the-top gory horror movies and unclassifiable stuff—such as *Blue Movie*.

Pasolini divided *Salò* into three circles—Manias, Shit and Death, each overtopping the previous one—to show the progressive annihilation of the human being. *Blue Movie* goes one step further, to the point that everything is reduced to a mere commodity since the beginning, human beings included. Therefore, animate and inanimate objects become one and the same. Claudio does not photograph women anymore: he is attracted by objects, and treats his model as if she was one ("I'll turn you into a can," he says). There is no difference between a Coca-Cola can and a nude body: both are used to sell commodities, both are sold as commodities. And both are ultimately full of piss and shit. In one of the most conceptually daring and extreme moments ever committed to celluloid, Daniela is held prisoner inside a room; there, she has to defecate and urinate in order to fill up Marlboro packets and Coke cans, and receives vacuum canned junk food and cigarettes in exchange, in a nihilistic mockery of consumerism's "product for

use" urgency and the capitalistic exploitation of the working classes as well ("Bastard … just one cigarette for two packets full of shit," she complains about her "wage"). Cigarette packets and cans are then put in a fridge, the true monolith of the Italian post–World War II economic "Boom," the symbol of a hard-fought wealth, a proof that "we are not hungry anymore."

The graphically portrayed scatological excesses made *Blue Movie* an ideal prosecution of *Spell*, even bleaker and more unflinchingly filmed. Cavallone systematically rejected every aesthetic rule, just like his protagonist repudiates what is commonly accepted as "beautiful." After the formal complexity of the director's previous works, the *cinéma-vérité* flavor is fully captured by the minuscule budget. Yet once again the surrealistic flashes, unnerving detail, and a-rhythmic cuts continually catch the viewer off-guard. Some of Silvia's hallucinations are almost horror movie material, such as the sight of a hand coming out of a tub filled with bright red liquid and grabbing the girl, à la *Repulsion* (1965, Roman Polanski) or Silvia hitting Claudio in the head with a rock which turns into a skull. But the film as a whole is a non-linear, even puzzling experience, which climaxes with a baffling ending.

Clearly, as in *Spell—Dolce mattatoio*, Cavallone had been influenced by *Sweet Movie*, Makavejev's grim pastiche about the failure of both Capitalism and Communism: his use of stock footage (World War II concentration camps and bonzes setting themselves on fire) was not simply a reference to Makavejev's film, though, but one of the director's habits since his very first films. With *Blue Movie*, he perfected this practice and enounced the philosophy behind it: under the opening credits, a series of camera shots are accompanied by the sound of gunfire. The symbolic meaning is evident: Images are bullets, powerful weapons that can hurt the eyes and consciences alike. As the director explained,

> *Extreme* is what breaks the rules. Sade's philosophy was extreme, but in a pre-revolutionary society. Bataille is the symbol of "extreme" in a bourgeois society. Nowadays being extreme means something beyond that: it's something that brings into play one's responsibility and which crosses every single economic class like a red thread, simply because there are no classes anymore. It's quite a dangerous matter.

*Blue Movie*'s overall bleakness did not rule out the director's peculiar, vitriolic humor, which on the other hand was absent in *Spell*. The black man makes rambling speeches, the radio vomits absurdist slogans ("Not messages, but massages!") and excerpts from *Alice in Wonderland*, while the use of classical music emphasizes Cavallone's idea to "piss off the raincoat crowd": most notably, Offenbach's *Can Can* playing as Funari performs a fellatio deprives the act of its function—excitement—and turns it into a joke on the audience, as Cavallone purposely avoids any explicit detail. Later on in the film, Offenbach's music is used to comment a scene where Claudio gives Daniela some food in exchange for a hand-job, the explicit shots are interspersed with those of the woman voraciously licking breadcrumbs off the man's chest as she masturbates him.

Cavallone's protagonists often kill themselves or try to, like Frank/Eva in *Afrika*, Mark Davis in *Zelda*, Paolo in *Maldoror*. This is the case with Claudio as well in the film's enigmatic denouement: but in *Blue Movie*, the real suicide is that of the director himself, and it's an on-screen suicide, Cavallone-style. Diving head-first across the

boundaries and into hardcore porn, while at the same time putting onscreen his most uncompromising political worldview, meant to cross a line and never look back.

Once Cavallone had ambitions. He thought that films could change the world, or at least kick in the groin those who thought they couldn't. With *Blue Movie*, he finally gave up. Significantly, most of his following work would fall into the hardcore genre.

## *The "Red Light" Years*

Following *Blue Movie*, Cavallone split his activity as a filmmaker in two. On the one hand, there was television, to which he returned with the reportage *Dentro e fuori la classe*, broadcast in three parts (respectively titled *Io sono ... capisci?*, *Boh!* and *Il pezzo di carta*) on Rai Uno from November 27 to December 12, 1979: each installment depicted an ordinary day in three different schools from a different part of the nation, respectively a technical institute in Genoa, a lyceum in Rome and an agrarian institute in Cosenza, and included interviews with the students. Cavallone shot over 45,000 meters of film, without any pre-existing script, and granting total freedom of expression to the interviewees to preserve spontaneity. It was a return to his early days, which explored with an uncommon sensibility the world of teenagers at school, their problems, the relationship with their parents, their dreams, or lack of, for the future. The documentary was characterized by a singular pessimism: as a critic noted, "it seems there are no wishes, nor ideals, nor ambitions or fights to share."[45]

Parallel to that, Cavallone was now fully dabbling in hardcore porn. Shot during the summer of 1979, *Blow Job* (once again a Warholian title, even though the original was to be *La strega nuda*, The Naked Witch) was an extremely rushed production. Officially financed by Martial Boschero's company Anna Cinematografica, *Blow Job* was in fact produced by Pietro Belpedio, one of the pioneers of Italian porn with his company Distribuzione Cinematografica 513 (note the company's name, which recalls the aforementioned "Edizioni 513".) Boschero had a cameo as a customer at the hotel in one of the initial scenes.

Shooting was to take place entirely in a villa near Riolo, in North-East Italy, near the city of Faenza. Belpedio recalled that the villa belonged to a dirty old man, who gave it almost for free to the production but asked to be on set when the explicit sex scenes were shot.[46] The extreme poverty shows throughout the film, and it is sad to see how the director had to work virtually with nothing. Yet the result is strangely fascinating. Technically, *Blow Job* is hardcore porn, since it does feature several explicit sex scenes, despite the director claiming otherwise. Nevertheless, it is the closest Cavallone came to making a Gothic horror movie: at times, it almost looks like a thinking man's version of one of the sexy horror films made in the 1970s. Its complex, Escherian plot deserves a detailed summary.

The opening sequence is unsettling. The first images show the park of a luxurious villa, with secular trees under a rainstorm, then a subjective camera enters the hall of a squalid hotel, accompanied by gloomy music, like a sort of malevolent, eerie presence: the film's two main settings are introduced and shown as strictly complementary, as a hint of what will follow. Cut to a naked couple in a room: actors Stefano Vicinelli (Danilo

Micheli) and Diana (Anna Massarelli) are discussing the fact that they are broke. With an embarrassed phone call, the hotel clerk asks them to pay the hotel fee and leave. Meanwhile, upstairs, a woman is menaced by someone or something unseen. She screams and cries for help, then jumps out of the window. The aftermath of her fall looks like an outtake from a Joe D'Amato film, with intestines spilled all over the pavement. ("Hey," Stefano comments cynically, "it looks like somebody threw a bowl of spaghetti upside down!"). Stefano and Diana take advantage of the ensuing chaos and flee the hotel.

At a racetrack, Stefano meets a scarred woman in her forties, Angela (Anna Bruna Cazzato), who helps him pick a winning horse, and in return asks them for a ride to her villa in the countryside: she wants Dario to help her "pass the gate." During the trip they meet a trio of surreal characters, while Stefano glimpses—and it's an impressive, eerie moment—a biker whose head looks like a skull. At the villa, a sinister-looking, equally scarred butler, Alphonse (Valerio Isidori; Cavallone initially wanted Luciano Rossi for the role) awaits them. Then, even stranger things ensue. Angela puts a spell on Diana, who becomes inexplicably ill; Stefano goes looking for a doctor and meets a young, beautiful woman named Sibilla (Mirella Venturini), who gives him a magic powder to cure Diana.

*Blow Job*'s second half conveys a weird dreamlike quality. Angela and Diana leave Stefano alone in the villa and go to a ball; in the middle of the night, Sibilla comes out of a mirror and takes Stefano to a cave, where she hypnotizes him and they make love. Cavallone was proud of this sequence, especially the 360° shots following Sibilla as she moves in circles around the man, like a predator. Then, in another eerie moment, Stefano finds himself in pitch black darkness, surrounded by a group of old men carrying candles who start waltzing around him; when the lights turn on, a ball is revealed to be taking place in the villa's huge salon. The dancers, many of whom are wearing grotesque masks, are reflected on mirrors all over a wall and Alphonse operates a bull's eye on the participants. Apparently, Stefano is experiencing bilocation, and is in two different places at the same time: in the cave with Sibilla and at the villa, with the naked Diana, who is seemingly in a hypnotic trance and dances with the guests in turn, regardless of him.

The mysterious biker arrives, and turns out to be a woman with a skull mask; she starts a tribal, primitive dance, and all those she passes by drop dead, until she and Diana are the only ones left in the room. Diana becomes mad at Stefano: she utters the same words as the suicidal woman at the film's beginning, and falls out of a window. Stefano is left alone with Angela: it turns out that she and Sibilla are one and the same, a powerful witch who absorbs her lovers' energy in order to reincarnate into a new body. Stefano confronts and apparently destroys them by shattering the huge mirror in the salon.

The young man then suddenly finds himself back at the hotel. The woman who has committed suicide is revealed to be Diana. Amidst the crowd, Stefano glimpses Sibilla and Alphonse, staring at him. This circular, enigmatic ending is a powerful, absurdist coup-de-theatre that shatters both the film's narrative and the audience's expectations. As Sibilla repeatedly says, reason must be left aside in order to understand events ("Get rid of the brain. That's what prevents you from seeing the cosmic dance

we are playing"), while throughout the movie Stefano is told that he is not free, and everything was predestined from the beginning.

*Blue Movie* was a stark, grim and matter-of-fact view on the contemporary world; *Blow Job*, on the other hand, is a metaphysical and elusive, even escapist fantasy. It is as if Cavallone lost interest in the everyday world and concentrated on his own spiritual side: the film is spiced with literary references that vary from Carlos Castaneda's writings to Aldous Huxley's 1954 essay on drugs, *The Doors of Perception*. As the director explained, "the whole film was focused on the possibility of escaping from our own bodies, by modifying sensorial perceptions through the use of drugs or self-concentration." Yet, at one point Sibilla says: "The world is tired, its end is near, people have lost the will to live…." No wonder that the film's main characters are desperately void inside. At one point, Stefano says: "I have many air bubbles in my head…. Many white air bubbles."

*Blow Job* is a fascinating oddity: puzzling, scary, even darkly comical at times. As in *Blue Movie*, absurd off-screen voices are used as commentary and a sarcastic counterpart to the characters' deadpan behavior: at the racetrack, for instance, an annoying announcer keeps repeating that a boy got lost and is waiting for his mother; soon, it will be Stefano and Diana's turn to get lost. There's even room for one truly grim sight gag in the final scene as a cop picks up Diana's offal from the pavement with his bare hands and puts them in a plastic bag, while indifferently talking to Stefano.

Despite its technical faults, continuity errors, bad acting and miserable budget, *Blow Job* is technically more accomplished than *Blue Movie* and is perhaps the full expression of the director's mystical and esoteric interests. Its imagery is also extremely sharp: the recurring character of the skull/biker echoes Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950), while the dual appearance of the witch pays homage to Buñuel's *Cet obscur objet du desir* (1977). The result is one of the director's most oddly fascinating works.

*Blow Job* was first rejected by the board in February 1980, after Cavallone refused to perform the cuts that had been requested, for a total of 3 minutes and 16 seconds. In May 1980, in appeal, he eventually obliged, and the movie was given the censorship certificate, on the condition that the title be accompanied by the subtitle *Soffio erotico* (Erotic Whiff). The latter addition was motivated because by law foreign titles must be accompanied by "the contextual and faithful translation into Italian," which of course this was not. Posters bore a more allusive subtitle, *Dolce lingua* (Sweet Tongue).

Another obscure project dating from the same period was *Blue Ecstasy*. It was announced in the magazine *Il Giornale dello Spettacolo* on September 22, 1979, as "based on *I canti di Maldoror*," and two months later Cavallone, in an interview for *Repubblica* about *Dentro e fuori la classe*, announced the imminent release of a film "based on *I canti di Maldoror* and titled *Il dio selvaggio*."[47] Once again, like he had done with *Lontano dagli occhi* and *N come negrieri*, Cavallone was attempting to revive an old project under a new skin; this time, the idea was to recycle the footage from *Maldoror* within a hardcore film, financed by the company 3G International, whose main activity consisted in buying and distributing porn flicks from Northern Europe. Its main associates were director of photography Giancarlo Ferrando, a G. Stefanutti, and actor George Hilton, who was trying to recycle himself as a distributor. Cavallone shot a few hardcore scenes somewhere in the woods around Rome, featuring Ajita Wilson, Pauline

Teutscher, Hassen Jabber (who had played a role in *Blow Job*), Nicola Miglio and other performers provided by agent Antonio Aschini, a.k.a. Tony Askin. It was very strong stuff, focusing on S&M practices, rape and torture; another sequence, decidedly more surreal in tone, showed Wilson having sex with a portable TV set. However, it is uncertain whether such scenes were ever edited with footage from the original *Maldoror* or used as inserts for other films. In the former case, it might be possible that the movie had a clandestine distribution.[48]

A few months later, in November 1980, *La gemella erotica (Due gocce d'acqua)* (The Erotic Twin—Dead Ringers, 1980) came out. Shot in February of that year in the village of Ronciglione, near Viterbo, during the Carnival, it was partly inspired by a project which dated a few years earlier, *Le gemelle*, from a script written by producer Francesco Mazzei with Franco Brocani, Laura Toscano and Marcello Aliprandi. Possibly inspired by Brian De Palma's *Sisters* (1973), *Le gemelle* was an erotic thriller about twin sisters, Betty and Alina, who own a psychiatric clinic; Betty is uninhibited, while Alina is introverted. When Alina starts an affair with Betty's husband, Carlo, the two lovers plan to murder Betty, and make it look as if it was Alina who died; but their perfect plan will go terribly wrong. The tentative cast for *Le gemelle* included Mary and Madeleine Collinson, Michele Placido (as Carlo), Enrico Maria Salerno, Gianni Macchia and Luigi Pistilli. Cavallone was supposed to shoot it in January 1975, before *Maldoror*, but filming was postponed to late 1975, and *Le gemelle* was eventually abandoned for financial reasons.

*La gemella erotica* materialized through the intervention of producer Rodolfo Putignani, who appears in the credits also as co-author of the story, while the screenplay is credited solely to Cavallone. A jewel dealer and real estate intermediary who had reinvented himself as a producer, Putignani had financed such works as Daniele Pettinari and Pier Carpi's *Cagliostro* and Fernando di Leo's *Gli amici di Nick Hezard* (a.k.a. *Nick the Sting*, 1976), which benefited from renowned actors and had good commercial potential in the mainstream market, but *La gemella erotica* was clearly not in the same league. For the leading role, Putignani imposed his wife Patrizia Gasperini (credited as Patricia Behnn), while Tony was played by Danilo Micheli.

*La gemella erotica—Due gocce d'acqua* partially rewrites the plot, and revolves around a twist ending which the average viewer would have spotted early on: Mary has already killed her sister, and her mind removed the event, causing her to develop a split personality. Her scheming husband Tony, a psychoanalyst, manipulates her into believing that Norma is still alive, apparently to get rid of her with the help of his secretary (and lover). In a climax that recalls *La vittima designata* (1971, Maurizio Lucidi), "Norma" pays a hired killer (a black heroin addict who is also one of her lovers) to kill "Mary," with the expected results.

Although the circulating copies do not feature explicit sex scenes, *La gemella erotica* was shot hardcore, given the presence in the cast of such porn regulars as Sabrina Mastrolorenzi, Pauline Teutscher, and Guya Lauri Filzi; the latter, who had already performed explicit sex scenes in *Blow Job*, acted as a double for Gasperini for the hardcore footage. Even Tony Askin took part in a sex scene, as a personal favor to Cavallone, since no actor was available.[49] Several explicit bits were cut so that the movie would receive a V.M.18 rating.

The director's hand is almost unrecognizable, and his lack of interest is painfully evident throughout. A couple of sex scenes depict violence against women, a common feature in his porn films. An early sequence depicts one of Tony's patients fantasizing about raping a barmaid: it is shot in ugly slow-motion, with wide-angle shots and violet lights, to the sound of a hard rock guitar riff. Later on, the man fulfills his fantasies: he sexually assaults the woman, points a knife at her throat and forces her to practice a blow-job on him (shades of Shaun Costello's *Forced Entry*, 1973), then he slits her throat. Cavallone throws in ample documentary footage shot during the local Carnival just to pad out the running time, and a long sequence in a night club goes on and on in an excuse to introduce the character played by Teutscher and provide another sex encounter in a wardrobe (a fellatio and a handjob) which involves actors Spartaco Maggetti and the then underage Sabrina Mastrolorenzi. Other scenes almost look like the result of self-sabotage: as Mary claims that she feels "like a withered tree," the camera lingers on a withered tree in the distance. What is more, the acting is amateurish, starting with Gasperini, whose brief career included only a couple more titles, Mario Gariazzo's *Play Motel* (1979) and Di Leo's *Madness—Vacanze per un massacro* (1980).

Cavallone was so ashamed of the result that he claimed he left the set during shooting, and some sources suggested that Luigi Cozzi took over; Cozzi himself was adamant that this never happened, and the fact that Cavallone is also credited as editor is proof that he followed the film in post-production. But his embarrassment is understandable: *La gemella erotica* was a film best forgotten for all involved, including Putignani, whose career in the movies would end abruptly just a few months later. In fact, in April 1981 the producer was arrested for perjury during the investigation on an obscure double murder,[50] and later fled to Madrid to avoid prison.

Those were bad times for the Italian cinema, and for Cavallone as well. In early summer of 1981 he accepted to direct another hardcore porn for Boschero and Belpedio. He ended up making three films: *Baby Sitter*, also known as *Il nano erotico* and released in France as *Petites fesses juvéniles* (*pour membres bienfaiteurs)*,[51] *Pat, una donna particolare*, and *... e il terzo gode*. Shooting took place in a villa near Rome (the same one seen in Massaccesi's *Rosso sangue* and in *La gemella erotica*) with a cast that included a trio of French actresses, Dominique Saint Claire, Nadine Roussial and Mika Barthel, a couple of Italian porn regulars, Pauline Teutscher and Sabina Mastrolorenzi, plus several improvised actors. One such was the Italo-kurdish extra Serwan A. Hoshyar, who earned his living as a painter in Rome, and who involved in the shoot an English friend, Stuart O'Brien. Hoshyar recalled that shooting went on for about three months, with various interruptions: the footage that ended up on *Pat, una donna particolare* and *Baby Sitter* was shot in June.[52] It's still a mystery whether there exists extra material from the shoot, either used in other films or not.

The three flicks are noteworthy for their sheer unpleasantness and contempt for standard hardcore narrative patterns. For one thing, the "star" of *Pat, una donna particolare* and *Baby Sitter* is a dwarf (credited as "Petit Loup": his real name was Giuseppe Sottile), and the character of "Pat" in the eponymous film is a transsexual who, in the longest sex scene, copulates with a male partner on a wooden table.[53] Here and there, Cavallone spliced in a few of his trademark references: the opening sequence of *Pat, una donna particolare* features a man walking with the dwarf on his shoulders, an image

reminiscent of Jodorowsky's *El Topo* (1970); the dwarf is called "Peeping," a nod to Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960). Literary references include André Pieyre de Mandiargues' *La Motocyclette* (*Baby Sitter* features masturbation atop a speeding motorbike) and, most notably, Frederick William Rolfe: in fact, the director chose to hide behind the pseudonym Baron Corvo, previously given to Rolfe by Duchess Sforza Cesarini.

Cavallone's heart obviously wasn't in these films. "Alberto made them for money, I wouldn't say negligently, but doing things his own way, just to piss off the producer," says Giulio Cavallone, adding that perhaps his father had asked money for a project, but the producer asked him in return to make two porn movies. "You know, this is a compromise that could have made sense in Alberto's logic: 'You don't let me make the film I want and you almost force me to make shitty hardcore porn instead? Well, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to shoot these films but I won't put my name on them, and I'm going to make them my own way!.'"[54] And, indeed, the results are poles apart from the majority of the porn fare made in Italy during the early 1980s: no wonder *Pat, una donna particolare* found its way in the grittier German hardcore market, as *Die Schöne Pat und der Supergeile Liliput*.

*...e il terzo gode* is the least interesting of the Baron Corvo triptych. It was rejected twice by the Board of censors, in October 1982 and March 1983, and was distributed clandestinely by the end of 1984, with the title *La gang delle porno mogli*: the phony opening titles were taken from the Italian prints of Pavlos Filippou's *Mavri Afroditi / Nel mirino di Black Aphrodite* (a.k.a. *Blue Passion*, 1978). The severely cut version released to home video in Germany and titled *Schreie der Lust* retains the Italian credits, which mention a couple of actors from Filippou's film (Annique Borel and Klay Half), and the director's name is misspelled as "Felipesten." The movie revolves around a thin crime plot, about the chase for a suitcase full of heroin which belongs to a drug dealer named Serwan (Hoshyar), and the sex scenes are nondescript, with the exception of the one where Hoshyar, in bed with Saint Claire and Barthel, caresses the women's bodies with a rose, a moment which reprises a similar scene in *Zelda*. The violence is conspicuous and unpleasant: in a scene, the gangster tortures Saint Claire's character by putting out cigarettes on her breasts (echoing a similar moment in *Afrika*) and threatens her with a hot iron, and the ending features a guy being shot in the face, with cheap gory effects. It was the emphasis on violence that caused the movie to be banned; it suggests how Cavallone considered pornography as a way to explore the dark side of sexuality (as he had done in *Blue Movie*), a theme which emerges much more convincingly in the other two Baron Corvo movies.

The plot of *Baby Sitter* gives an idea of porn according to Cavallone. A girl (Sabrina Mastrolorenzi) is hired by a rich couple to babysit their child, only to discover that the "baby" is actually a sadistic dwarf, the husband of the lady of the house (Saint Claire) who in turn is the lover of the chauffeur (Hoshyar) and spies on her husbands' misdeeds at the expense of the unfortunate victim via a CCTV (the days of the experiments at "Rising Workshop" are very distant indeed). The emphasis is on voyeurism and sadism, and in the sequences featuring "Petit Loup" Cavallone leaves free rein to the grotesque: the diabolical dwarf sports a variety of dildos, including one on his forehead which makes him look like a bizarre unicorn, and which he uses to rape the baby sitter; in a flashback he licks another victim (Nadine Roussial) whose body he previously smeared

with cream and chocolate. Despite the shoestring budget and the director's lack of interest, the movie comes alive thanks to these Surrealist flashes, and on the contrary, it loses steam in the more conventional moments, such as the sex scenes between Saint Claire and Hoshyar, where Cavallone had to cut to the chase and give the audience what they wanted.

*Pat, una donna particolare*, which denotes a wry taste for mystification, is the most interesting of the trio. Filmed with the shooting title *Peeping-tom* [*sic*], it is an offbeat homage to Michael Powell's film, and repeatedly takes the viewer off guard. The opening scene, where Frank (Hoshyar), dressed up as a sheik, purchases a belly dancer from a slave merchant and pays him with "petrodollars," tries to deceive us into believing that the story takes place in an Oriental setting, as a solitary palm tree in the background seems to suggest. But soon the scene is revealed to be a film-within-a-film, a homemade porno which turns into a snuff movie when Frank strangles his partner during love-making. *Pat, una donna particolare* becomes a *mise en abyme*, and each sex scene is a small film in itself, the result of the crazy inventiveness of the quartet of pornographers who make snuff movies in an isolated villa. In the films shot by Pat and "her" accomplices, the rules of the ordinary world cease to be valid. For instance, during intercourse (to the tune of Paul Dukas' *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*!), Hoshyar, in a magician costume, turns into the dwarf. Another sex scene has Frank playing a vampire who chases a girl, rapes her and finally impales her with a wooden stake (the woman, Dominique Saint Claire, is having her period, and Frank practices a vampire-like cunnilingus on her); in the middle of intercourse, the man advertises a watches brand: a vitriolic surreal idea which is just in tune with Cavallone's vision on the commodification of sex, and makes *Pat, una donna particolare* an ideal prosecution of *Blue Movie*.

Even the power relations among the four pornographers are mystifying. In the opening Frank behaves like the gang leader, and treats Peeping the dwarf as a subordinate, but later we find out that the latter is the real director, a true *auteur* who pursues "realism pushed to the limits of truth … films which must be documents," and asks the actor "the truth of action, not the surrogate of simulation, so that spectacle becomes ceremony, something sacred." The most shameless imposture concerns Pat's true gender: "Nobody is perfect," says her partner (O'Brien) quoting a famous line from Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959). The bizarre revelation of the family ties that involve the main characters, who turn out to be stepbrothers born from one mother and different fathers, is another *coup de theatre* emblematic of Cavallone's demystifying vein. Here the director's attitude toward the graphic sex scenes is openly antagonistic: the pornographic interludes are secondary if not mocking compared with the grotesque aspects of the story. As in the previous films, sex is accompanied by classical music: Edvard Grieg's *Morning* plays as a counterpoint to a bucolic scene, with Petit Loup dressed as a faun, while a Strauss waltz accompanies the vampire's deeds. The overall tone recalls the porn paperback comics of the period, complete with obscene gags (a performer is killed via an electrified dildo) and macabre-surreal peaks: the murdered actresses are taken away in a wheelbarrow, recalling a scene from Mario Bava's *Lisa e il diavolo* (1973).

The zany quartet of *Pat, una donna particolare* employ a strategy that is an acid parody of the porn business Cavallone had to deal with: non-existent means, improvisation, and a conscious tendency to self-destruction. All of them keep on making

movies at all costs, even knowing that there is no other way except (in the film) jail, or (in life) humiliation, oblivion, the betrayal of one's own ideas and integrity. The moral of the story emerges in a dialogue passage inside a car between Hoshyar and Mastrolorenzi. "To me, cinema should be fun … you cannot always cry," the woman says. "Pornography, in short … in real life, though, nothing ever goes well." One recalls Cavallone's ideas on the function of movies as expressed in the *New Cinema* interview, when he seemed to have a long and brilliant future ahead of him. Once again, porn provided a terrain for a parable on the commodification of body and death through the Seventh Art, and for a reflection on the paradox of a type of cinema which depicts the primitive instinct of life, coitus, and turns it into death wish.

According to some sources, Cavallone shot several more porn flicks between 1984 and 1985. The titles are unknown to this day, with the exception of *Carillon*, set in the world of antique shop dealers, and starring Nadine Roussial: apparently it was never distributed, neither in Italy nor abroad.

Meanwhile the "other" Alberto Cavallone kept working sporadically for television. He collaborated with the program *Foto di gruppo*, a series of one-hour monographic reports for Rai Uno on the Italian show business: *Night*, broadcast on June 28, 1980, starred Massimo Serato and playboy Gerino Gerini, who evoked the atmosphere of 1950s night clubs, with the participation of several protagonists of that era, namely Peter Van Wood, Bruno Martino, Peppino di Capri, Fred Bongusto and Nicola Arigliano; the evocatively titled *Il fantasma nella madia*, cured by Gianna Bellavia, was broadcast on October 24, 1981. Around the same period as his Baron Corvo movies, Cavallone took care of the technical direction for a made-for-TV film, *Per questa notte*, produced by Belpedio and starring the comic duo of brothers Mario and Pippo Santonastaso; the artistic direction was handled by Nando Cicero. *Per questa notte* had to be the first in a 52-episode series about the birth of the vaudeville tradition in Italy, when small companies traveled all around and staged their shows in village squares and small provincial theaters. It was shot on video cameras, a challenge that suited Cavallone's most technical, experimental side. As Belpedio recalled, "We created a lab for post-production, with the first special effects. Everything done by Alberto, just because of this pioneering spirit he had, which always managed to be ahead of the times."[55]

Cavallone attempted a return to mainstream filmmaking with *Il padrone del mondo* (*Master of the World)* (1983), a rip-off of Jean-Jacques Annaud's prehistoric epic *La guerre du feu* (1981). Announced in mid–1982,[56] it was initially to be shot in Ethiopia, but filming took place at the Canary Islands with a slightly higher budget than usual for Cavallone's standards. The director's care for anthropologically correct behavior on behalf of the non-speaking cast made up for plot shortcomings, and the movie featured a good deal of gory effects, such as warriors eating their dead enemies' brains. Despite receiving some press during its making, including a lengthy interview with actress Maria Vittoria Ghirlanda (who played a witch doctor) in the newspaper *Stampa Sera*,[57] it sank without trace upon release in Italy due to the financial breakdown of the distributor, Stefano Film. Cavallone—who also wrote a similarly-themed story that Dardano Sacchetti would later develop into the script for Umberto Lenzi's *Iron Master—La guerra del ferro* (1983)—signed it with the pseudonym Dirk Morrow.

In August 1984, according to ministerial papers Cavallone started working on a

**Spanish lobby card for *Il padrone del mondo* (1983), released in Spain as *Los forjadores del mundo*), featuring a gruesome scene from the film (courtesy Lucas Balbo).**

film called *Il cliente misterioso* (The Mysterious Customer). Allegedly, he founded a production company, Video 84, to finance it; he would also be the editor, while Maria Pia Luzi was listed in the production papers as costume designer, and Alberto Baldan Bembo would write the score. Shooting would take place in Rimini and San Marino and at the De Paolis Studios, starting October 1984, on a budget of 332 million *lire*, with a cast that included Patrizia Gasperini, Mirella Venturini and Claudio Marani. In fact, the bulk of the project had been filmed several years earlier, and precisely right after the shooting for *Blow Job* had been completed, possibly with the financial participation of Rodolfo Putignani,[58] and in 1984 Cavallone resumed it for television.

The story for *Il cliente misterioso* mixes thriller elements with drama, and centers on the controversial theme of terrorism. It opens with Laura (Gasperini), hearing someone calling for help from the condo next to hers: it is a young woman named Isabella (Venturini), the girlfriend of a detained terrorist, Aldo (Claudio Morolli). Laura goes searching for help, but when she comes back the wounded girl has disappeared, and the commissioner on the case (Armando Tancioni) dismisses her as a mythomaniac. Then Laura finds news of Isabella having killed herself in another part of town (the suicide had actually been staged by her killers), and starts investigating on her own, with the help of a lawyer, Pavesi (Marani), who defended the terrorist in court. They pose as a couple, and gradually fall for each other. The central part of the film draws back to the hotel scene in *N come negrieri*, as the two lovers discuss the evils of modern society. The third act lands into conspiracy movie territory, as the two protagonists find

out too much about the ties between the terrorist group and the authorities, and end up defeated by the system: Aldo is found dead in jail, in another staged suicide, Pavesi is arrested for complicity with terrorists, and Laura is eliminated on behalf of the commissioner (who is part of the mysterious plot) and presented to the press as a dangerous terrorist.

Following the same sad fate of other projects concocted by its director, *Il cliente misterioso* disappeared into oblivion; it was probably too thorny for television, given the allusions to authorities manipulating terrorism, not to mention the grim, pessimistic ending. The memory of Aldo Moro's kidnapping and killing was still too vibrant in everyone's mind.

Other film projects from the same period sank without trace, such as the elusive *Carillon*: d.o.p. Maurizio Centini recalled it was shot in a snowy Paris in 1984 or 1985, but not completed. Cavallone mentioned also *Le immagini della morte,* a shockumentary in the vein of *Faces of Death* for producer Luciano Martino, which he took over from Alfonso Brescia, but which was eventually finished by some other director.

To make ends meet, Cavallone accepted a number of extemporaneous, humiliating assignments: Luigi Cozzi recalled having met him sometime in the early Eighties, when the latter was supervising dubbing for foreign porn flicks. In the same period, Cavallone also directed the shot-on-video intervals where Ilona Staller introduced her *Cicciolina* cartoons for VHS releases on the Eva/Mediolanum label, related to Distribuzione Cinematografica 513.

Then, a decade of silence, sporadically interrupted by minor jobs, such as the screenplay revision and storyboards for a little-seen animated feature, *I sogni proibiti di Tommy* (1992, Alberto Chimenz) and some work on Italian television for RAI, namely the collaboration with TV shows dealing with mysteries and unsolved cases, such as *Chi l'ha visto* and *Telefono giallo*, for which he shot interviews and short docu-fiction segments. It was a return to his journalistic origins, as Cavallone's contribution consisted in interviews and filmed reconstructions of actual events.

## *Epilogue*

Alberto Cavallone's name returned to prominence among film fans in September 1997: the magazine *Nocturno Cinema*, devoted to the rediscovery of obscure and forgotten Italian films and filmmakers, published a long, detailed interview with him. Cavallone openly discussed his career, unveiling many mysteries yet at times adding others, such as the statement that *Maldoror* was shot in 1977 instead of 1975, and the denial that *Blow Job* featured any hardcore scenes except for "one simulated [*sic*] blow job"—two examples of the director's peculiar way of revisiting his own career by bending truth and lies in a way similar to Jess Franco's. The fascinating, compelling overview brought curiosity and led to the critical rediscovery of the filmmaker's work, especially *Spell—dolce mattatoio*.

With the help of Manlio Gomarasca and Davide Pulici, the magazine's co-founders, Cavallone had concocted a script for what would be his comeback as a director, a morbid thriller tentatively called *Internet Story*, centered on the dark side of the world wide

web and inspired by a true story, which reprised some ideas from the original screenplay for *Le gemelle*. The project seemed to take off, after a promotional tour at the 1997 MIFED, the Cinema and Television Multimedia Market held annually in Milan, in late October: for the occasion, Cavallone and his acolytes adventurously assembled an alluring trailer, consisting of newly shot material and footage from *Spell—Dolce mattatoio*, for foreign buyers. The director had thrown himself into this new project with enthusiasm, anxious to get involved in yet another challenge, despite his dire financial situation: "Every morning, in fact, I have to look in my pockets to see if I manage to make it through the day. Then I tell myself that I must, because of my four-year-old son who exists for an act of responsibility on my part," he wrote, referring to his younger son Marco, born in October 1992. "In a photograph, my son makes the V sign, so dear to Winston Churchill. I trust him. I'm ready for everything: shall we rob a bank to make a movie?"[59]

Sadly, it would never happen: Alberto Cavallone died on November 12, 1997, after suffering a fatal heart attack. He was only 59. Twenty years later, no less because of the unavailability on the video market of a large part of it, his body of work is still a fascinating, thought-provoking enigma, and the legacy of one of Italy's true *maudit* filmmakers.

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## Alberto Cavallone—Essential Filmography

1963 *La sporca guerra* (D, S, SC)
1964 *Lontano dagli occhi* (D, S, SC)
1966 *Z2 Operazione Circeo* (TV movie) (D, SC)
1967 *Per amore ... per magia* (SC); *La lunga sfida* (SC)
1969 *Le salamandre* (D, S, SC)
1970 *Dal nostro inviato a Copenaghen* (D, S, SC)
1971 *Quickly ... spari e baci a colazione* (D, S, SC)
1973 *Afrika* (D, SC)
1974 *Zelda* (D, S, SC)
1975 *Maldoror* (D, S, SC)
1977 *Spell–Dolce mattatoio* (D, S, SC)
1978 *Blue Movie* (D, S, SC)
1979 *Dentro e fuori la classe* (TV documentary series)
1980 *Blow Job—Soffio erotico* (D, S, SC)
1980 *La gemella erotica* (D, SC)
1982 *Baby Sitter* (D, S, SC) as 'Baron Corvo'; *Pat, una donna particolare* (D, S, SC) as "Baron Corvo"
1983 *Iron Master—La guerra del ferro* (S); *Il padrone del mondo (Master of the World)*
1984 *...e il terzo gode* (D, S, SC) as "Baron Corvo"

# 3

# Riccardo Ghione—Before and After the Revolution

To delve into the history of Italian cinema is a tricky experience. Sometimes one feels like David Hemmings' character in *Blow-up* (1966, Michelangelo Antonioni): details which at first glance appeared clear, turn nebulous if not deceptive, while others come to light which previously had not been even taken into consideration. The result leaves one dumbfounded, like the photographer who, at every blowup of the same revealing frame, realizes how the overall meaning of the picture is escaping more and more. Sometimes, it is just a matter of perspectives, as in a 17th century anamorphosis.

This is the case with Riccardo Ghione. To the few cinephiles who heard of him, the name elicits a smile, at the memory of that oddity that was *Il prato macchiato di rosso* (1973), his last and best known (or least elusive) work: a campy madness which, in the lack of better labels, has been classified as a horror movie, because of its story about capitalist vampires who drained poor people of their blood and sell it to Third World countries. To call it bizarre would be quite an understatement: it features blood bottled like wine, tin robots, hippies, psychedelic orgies … enough to become a cult movie of sorts—that sort of "cult," however, which feeds on mockery, and treats its objects as items for cheap fun, rather than material for further studies. And yet, the author's story is much more tortuous and interesting than that low-budget little film might let one imagine; and, indeed, the name of Riccardo Ghione is closely linked to one of the most radical film projects in Post–World War II Italy.

## *Prologue: Before the Revolution*

Born in Acqui Terme, Piedmont, in 1922, Riccardo Ghione was the son of the famed orchestra conductor and violinist Franco Ghione, Arturo Toscanini's assistant, who had directed at the world famous La Scala opera house in Milan starting in 1923. However, rather than music, since an early age it was moving images that attracted Riccardo's interest: "I was born for cinema, in the sense that since I was a kid I was already making movies drawn on paper. At five or six, I used to draw these movies, and almost

always I drew Chaplin, that is, a little man with a hat on. A friend of my mother has kept these movies religiously. That is to say, cinema was a true vocation, not something done to meet beautiful girls."[1]

As a teenager, Riccardo accompanied his father in the United States: in 1937 Franco Ghione was chosen as co-conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra alongside Victor Kolar, with a three-season contract.[2] Franco Ghione's stay in Detroit was not felicitous, though: the press criticized his choices of repertoire, since "he was primarily an operatic conductor, and his knowledge and expertise in the symphonic repertoire were limited"[3]; moreover, his "hot Italian blood … frequently boiled over at rehearsals and in his attempts to make himself understood his frustrations often reached the explosive stage."[4] Such a rage was also self-directed, as Ghione did not speak English, and his lack of language skills severely affected his work. At the end of the 1939–40 season he asked to have his contract terminated; his request was accepted and he flew back to Italy.

Overseas, young Riccardo nurtured the idea of a new kind of cinema, different and countercurrent. Many years later he would recall: "In 1939 I was in America, in Detroit, and I wrote an article—I was 17—called *Usciamo dai teatri di posa* (Let's Get Out of the Studios): it was the idea of making movies out of real life."[5] Back in Italy, he involved in his projects a writer friend who had just published his debut novel *Paesi tuoi*, and who was to become one of Italy's greatest writers of the 20th century: Cesare Pavese. "During the war, he was my guest for one month—I had a villa in the Langhe area—and we concocted a script out of *Paesi tuoi* together. We were going to make it, and I wanted to shoot it with real peasants…. But then they started bombarding left and right, and it was over."[6]

While Italy was at war, Ghione was not the only one to dream of a cinema devoid of production impositions and narrative conventions. But at that time the regime film industry produced quite a different type of entertainment. Such, for instance, was *Tosca*, which Jean Renoir came to shoot in Italy in May 1940; the director fled to France only four days later, at the beginning of the hostilities between Italy and France, having filmed only the sequence of Count Angelotti (Adriano Rimoldi) escaping from jail. The film was completed by his assistant, the German Carl Koch: not exactly the same thing. "I was there, and I was the assistant director," Ghione recalled, "and Luchino Visconti was there too."[7] Probably the two discussed, talked, confronted, exchanged ideas and suggestions. This is certainly not to say that Ghione invented Neorealism, of course: there are far too many revisionists around, and Ghione himself, when asked about this, pointed to Cesare Zavattini as the true father of the Neorealist revolution. But in the chaotic period that preceded the armistice, amid the last "*telefoni bianchi*" comedies and propaganda flicks, the cultural world was impregnated with dissatisfaction, murmurs, turmoil, although not in one direction only. Ferdinando Maria Poggioli was one of them: Ghione, not even 20, was Poggioli's assistant on a couple of elegant, complex psychological dramas, such as *Sissignora* (1941), together with his childhood friend and future film director, Alberto Lattuada.[8] Other filmmakers struggled against the limitations of the Italian film industry during the same period. The "fast Futurist" Emanuele Caracciolo flirted with the grotesque (*Troppo tardi t'ho conosciuta*, 1940); Riccardo Freda dreamed of Hollywood swashbucklers (*Don Cesare di Bazan*, 1942); Mario Soldati explored the Gothic (*Malombra*, 1942). Then, De Sica and Zavattini lighted up the fuse

with *I bambini ci guardano* (1942), and Visconti deflated the bomb with *Ossessione* (1943).

When Neorealism took hold, Ghione saw his dream become reality. "It really seemed to me that for the very first time in Italy someone had had an original idea, a biting one which interested the whole world."[9] And post–World War II Rome, albeit still ailing and bruised, was an extraordinary terrain for it to fructify. "In San Silvestro square, they were still selling American cigarette stubs, and there were small trucks instead of real buses. But throughout the city you could feel an extraordinary creative mood. It was as if there were dozens of Renaissance workshops in full activity. Movie workshops."[10]

It was 1949. Not yet thirty, the young Piedmontese aspiring filmmaker was dreaming of a revolutionary project: a filmed magazine, "which would be a bit like what *La Voce* and *Lacerba* had been in literature, meaning that it would represent a sum of the Neorealist experience."[11] To fully understand the grasp of Ghione's ambitions one must understand his cultural references: *La Voce* was a literary magazine published in Florence between 1908 and 1916, founded by the anti-conformist, brilliant Giuseppe Prezzolini, and modeled upon the German expressionist magazine *Der Sturm*. *Lacerba* was an Italian literary journal, published between 1913 and 1915. Both were hugely influential in the cultural world of the time: the former had among its contributors Benito Mussolini, while the latter was closely associated to the Futurist movement.

Ghione's idea was to disrupt and to throw in the air fences and prejudices, to contaminate in order to reinvigorate and renew the newsreel format, prone on patterns and characteristics unchanged since the Fascist era. To do this, he wanted to open the doors to interdisciplinary collaborations, experimentation, creative freedom, and give a more vivid and true image of reality and of the country that was living it. His own creature would also be a reaction to the hegemony of the *Settimana Incom*, the emphatic and ecumenical 10-minute weekly newsreel founded in 1946, which was screened before the feature film. To Ghione, it was to become "a "cultural page" of cinema … completely free from certain spectacular needs, which are usually difficult to escape."[12]

So, Ghione pulled out a million *lire* from his pocket and started working on *Documento Mensile* (Monthly Document). His partner in this venture was a chubby 22-year-old guy from Milan, a former veterinary student and ex-liquor salesman, who lived hand-to-mouth: Marco Ferreri. While Ferreri took charge of the organizational part, Ghione acted as the conductor, getting in touch with various intellectuals and convincing them to join his project. Sometimes, under bizarre situations. "I was walking in Via Sistina in Rome, and it was raining cats and dogs. In that moment, Roberto Rossellini's convertible Ferrari passed by, and I told him, 'Stop! Stop!' He stopped, got me aboard and we drove all around Rome, and right off the bat he told me the piece he would like to make."[13]

Soon the project attracted a number of potential participants, a company of friends open to extemporaneous interventions and contributions. In addition to Ghione there were also Luigi Malerba, Teo Usuelli and Giulio Questi—the latter, in Rome for a few weeks to meet Visconti, was fascinated by the company, and on his second trip to Rome he jumped on board the project. Questi himself partially corrected the idea that Ghione had financed *Documento Mensile* entirely with his own means, and that the participants

were made of money. In fact, Ghione and Ferreri had involved a financer from the province, "a tall, slim guy with rough talk, embarrassed to be in Rome among movie artists, anxious for his dough, a reluctant and unhappy moneylender." He and Questi both stayed in a room near Piazza di Spagna, which occasionally accommodated (unbeknownst to the landlady) a third guest—Ferreri, who in that period had no fixed domicile and slept on park benches.[14]

"*Documento Mensile* is a new film genre," the opening caption of the first issue stated. "Just like a cultural magazine, it brings together notes of criticism, documentation, short stories, poetic notations. The best-known directors are collaborating on it, as well as the distinguished personalities of the Italian and foreign cultural world, who exceptionally express themselves with the cinematic medium." The illustrious names involved, all of them contributing for free, were outstanding: Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, Giuseppe De Santis, Luciano Emmer, Roberto Rossellini, Alessandro Blasetti, Alberto Lattuada, Renato Guttuso, Alberto Moravia, Carlo Levi, Leonardo Sinisgalli. Other potential participants were announced, although it is uncertain whether for real interest on their part or for the producers' optimism: Charlie Chaplin, Vsevolod Pudovkin, Orson Welles, Henri-Georges Clouzot, René Clair, Claude Autant-Lara, Curzio Malaparte, Salvatore Quasimodo, Jacques Prévert, Pablo Picasso, Carl Gustav Jung….[15] The initiative was met enthusiastically by the critics: one even described *Documento Mensile* as "the miracle … of seeing the type of cinema that the masters of other arts have imagined so far without being able to express it."[16]

## *The Rise and Fall of* Documento Mensile

Ghione and Ferreri managed to complete two issues of *Documento Mensile*. Number One included the contributions of Vittorio De Sica and Alberto Moravia. The former, with *Ambienti e personaggi* (Environments and Characters), returned to the locations of *Ladri di biciclette* (1948), together with the two protagonists, Lamberto Maggiorani and Enzo Staiola, but without scriptwriter Cesare Zavattini, and had them move around, explaining their psychological reactions, in a sort of belated backstage. As for Moravia, with *Colpa del sole* the prestigious writer approached filmmaking for the first time, adapting his short story *La veranda*, originally published in 1943.[17] Two lovers (Giancarlo Sbragia and Strelsa Brown) are about to split up; but in the park outside their window they see a man shoot a woman, "a scene which acts as a screen and a projectile mirror for their inner pulsions"[18]; the woman, shocked by the event, reconciles with the man ("She has been hit and we are here, alive"). In six astonishing minutes, precursor in their own way, *Colpa del sole* synthesizes Moravia's prose into images, with at least one memorable moment: Brown's intense glance as, while kissing her man with vampire-like intensity, she looks at the body of that nameless woman outside the window, in an ideal mixture of love and death that surprisingly predates so much Italian cinema to come.

Issue Number Two of *Documento Mensile* featured short films by Luchino Visconti and Carlo Levi. Visconti's contribution was *Appunti su un fatto di cronaca* (Notes on a True Story), with a commentary written by novelist Vasco Pratolini. The "true story"

of the title was the murder of 12-year-old Annarella Bracci—raped, killed and thrown down a well—which in March 1950 shocked public opinion. It happened on the outskirts of Rome, in the poor township of Primavalle. Visconti unveiled its squalor in the few opening shots—the one-story sheds, the muddy passageways, the mounds of trash at the edge of the natural basin which the neighborhood faces, the boys playing amidst desolation. But the director avoided the rhetorical traps of Pratolini's commentary, while abstractly evoking Annarella's path toward death, with the images of the wreaths around the well, accompanied by the sound of lapping water; and he pointed to the malaise of post-war Italy, still weighed by the inheritance of Fascism: Primavalle was built starting 1936 by the "Fascist Institute for Social Housing," to collect the population moved from the city after the regulation plan; it was inaugurated just before the war, and completed in the 1950s.

**A rare set still of novelist Alberto Moravia (center, behind camera) filming the short film *Colpa del sole* in 1951. The couple embracing in the foreground are Giancarlo Sbragia and Strelsa Brown. The bespectacled man on the right is Riccardo Ghione.**

On the other hand, renowned writer Carlo Levi (the author of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, later adapted into a movie in 1979, starring Gian Maria Volonté), detached himself drastically from Neorealism with *Il prurito, ovverosia la vita è mistero* (The Itch, or Life Is Mystery). At the corner of a street, a man (Silvio Bagolini) is victim of a sudden itching attack; around him a small curious crowd gathers—women, priests, police agents—with each individual taking on a symbolic meaning, representing freedom, law, solidarity, science. Everyone would like to know why the man is scratching himself, and in turn they find themselves repeating his gestures, in a paradoxical and surrealistic chain reaction. Giulio Questi recalled watching Levi, in his one and only directorial experience, as the latter edited his own short film: "He turned back every moment in the dark to communicate some aesthetic finding. You could feel the pleasure and the discovery of the new medium in him, who was already a physician, a painter and a writer. 'He's having fun like a kid,' I heard someone whisper in my ear.… He instructed young composer Teo Usuelli on the soundtrack for his film. 'This is very important to me—he said—I appeal to your modesty. Only the sound of a cricket must accompany the itching in the film. A cricket's

cry. Like the crickets we hear at night in the streets of Rome. You must know that at night Rome is no longer a city: it is a big forest…."[19]

For the following installments of *Documento Mensile*, Ghione and Ferreri had other aces in the hole. Michelangelo Antonioni directed *Vertigine* (Vertigo), a short film set on a cable car in the Dolomites, which later became *La funivia del Faloria* and had a life of its own. Renato Guttuso made *Soluzioni di nudo* (Nude Solutions), in which he commented on his painting *La cucitrice*: "He said, 'It is useless to keep painting portraits of nude women, which don't mean anything. I painted a woman working on a milling machine,'"[20] Ghione explained. The poet Leonardo Sinisgalli, in *Vita silenziosa* (Silent Life), set among the objects of an attic, tried to reproduce with images the metric of poetry: "While shooting, he alternated six-meter shots and three-meter shots, three-meter shots and six-meter shots … it was an attempt at creating a cinematic 'verse.'"[21] Roberto Rossellini, in turn, discussed his relationship with Ingrid Bergman on the terrace of a hotel in Rapallo.

But the destiny of *Documento Mensile* would be very different from the one its makers dreamt. Even though post-production was completed for the first two issues, they were never screened in public, and, despite the prestigious names involved, were doomed to oblivion. On top of that, the short films made by Levi, Guttuso, Rossellini and Sinisgalli remained in an embryonic state: the negatives were left at the Tecnostampa lab, because Ghione didn't have the money to pay for development and printing. The main problem was another, though. "Since Visconti was involved in it, I was summoned by the General Director of Cinematography Nicola De Pirro—who among other things was a great friend of my father—and he told me: "Riccardo, what are you doing—the Communist?"[22]

Luchino Visconti's belonging to the Italian Communist Party meant trouble in a period where the Democrazia Cristiana held the reins of the ministerial committees. In November 1951, Ghione wrote an open letter to film critic Guido Aristarco, published on the magazine *Cinema*, where he complained about the various difficulties that prevented his project to see the light, above all "the hostile attitude of the technical committee, which, when presented with the first issues, after a delay of months, maybe also for non-existent political reasons, expressed a negative opinion."[23] According to the 1949 cinema law written by the then-undersecretary of the Presidency Giulio Andreotti (known as "the Andreotti law"), documentaries and short films were allowed a State financing after a conforming opinion on the part of a technical committee[24]: *Documento Mensile* was denied the financing because of the lack of the "minimum technical, artistic and cultural requisites" requested by the law—a paradoxical decision, given the names involved in the project. Ghione's testimony is fundamental to understand certain mechanisms that characterized Italian cinema of the era. To obtain public money, newsreels had to be paired with a feature film, but the monopoly of the cartel formed by the most important newsreel producers (including INCOM), which carved up over 80 percent of the state contributions, was insurmountable for the small fish: *Film Tribuna*, an experiment similar to *Documento Mensile* although less ambitious, met a similar fate. As Ghione pointed out, quoting the words of Luigi Chiarini, the government prizes encouraged the most popular films "at the expense of the artistic works which, since today they represent an act of courage on the part of the producer as well, would deserve a wider support from the State."[25]

Ghione was not very apologetic when speaking of his own project, and was far too severe when he liquidated the short films by Moravia and Levi as "questionable and a bit difficult," while spending words of praise for those by Sinisgalli and Guttuso. But he firmly claimed the intention of "making the inattentive audience aware of artists mostly unknown to the masses," by giving these artists a camera and pairing them with noted filmmakers, in order to create a bond, a community, a basin of ideas that would help cinema and other arts grow in a climate of mutual fecundation.

"You can imagine, dear Aristarco, with what love, but also with how much effort I collected all this material, and with what expense of energy and money. It was all useless! … I now find myself with nothing but a temerary enterprise, fruitless and without any possible evolution," Ghione concluded. He announced "one last sacrifice," that is combining all the short films in one single issue, to pair with a brief feature film, but eventually he gave up. The shorts made by Visconti, De Sica and Moravia came out only in France in 1953, and then disappeared from sight. A small excerpt of *Ambienti e personaggi* turned up almost half a century later in Marco Ferreri's last film, *Nitrato d'argento* (1996), while *Appunti su un fatto di cronaca* was exhumed only in the 1990s. Even the names involved got disinterested: Moravia never even talked about his only time as a director. More than a collective amnesia, it was a removal. The regret remains for not being able to see other contributions that were announced but never made: Giuseppe De Santis' short about occupations of the land in Sicily, Luciano Emmer's film about cats "rich and poor, breed and stray" at the Foro Traiano,[26] Umberto Saba's adaptation of his poetry anthology *Uccelli*; and especially *Le avventure del Sig. De Gasperi*, in which Curzio Malaparte imagined that the current President of the Council of Ministers met his own double. Considering the polemic vein of the writer of such works as *La pelle*, Malaparte's episode would have surely been mordant to say the least. Around the same time Malaparte made his one and only film as director: *Il Cristo proibito* (1951), starring Raf Vallone, which caused controversy, not least for the use of the term "*puttana*" (whore), a first in Italian cinema.

## *Love in the City*

After the sad end of *Documento Mensile*, Alberto Lattuada called Ghione to be his assistant for *Il cappotto* (1952), together with writer Luigi Malerba, who would become one of Ghione's best friends. Based on the short story by Nikolai Gogol, it was screened in competition at Cannes to rave reviews, but Lattuada lost the Grand Prix to Renato Castellani's *Due soldi di speranza* and Orson Welles' *Othello*, while the protagonist Renato Rascel lost the Best Actor Award to Marlon Brando for *Viva Zapata!* According to Ghione, his contribution to *Il cappotto* was far greater than the official chronicles say. "Malerba and I were the assistant directors … we wrote the script at night, in our room, because Zavattini's was very bad. We totally rewrote the script, he and I. We did not sign it, but we rewrote it. It's a beautiful film, it has nothing to do with Italy, but it's a beautiful film."[27]

Then came the turn of another project on his own, this time with the complicity of Cesare Zavattini. Ghione's concept was in the same direction as the previous experiment,

and attempted to relaunch the formula of a collective newsreel in the form of an anthology feature film. Zavattini contributed with his vision of cinema as a "stalking" of reality. "The individual ideas will be mostly drawn from news articles; and, when this will be possible, they will be portrayed on screen by the same protagonists who lived them in daily life."[28] The working title was *Lo spettatore n. 1* (The Spectator #1) and the periodicity would be half-yearly. "These films can be compared to as many issues of a magazine," the authors pointed out. "Each essay in each issue will be made by this or that director, and it will be their contribution to the unusual 'editorial staff.'"

The concept was evident from the very opening titles, in the form of a fake magazine, including a summary, and the various episodes had in common the theme of love, hence the title *L'amore in città*. The names involved were once again prestigious ones: Carlo Lizzani directed *Amore che si paga*, about prostitution in Rome, featuring interviews with real street hookers; Michelangelo Antonioni helmed *Tentato suicidio*, a harrowing report which gave voice to women who had attempted to commit suicide out of love; Francesco Maselli and Zavattini directed *Storia di Caterina*, the sad tale of a housemaid who had to abandon her little son because she was too poor; Dino Risi opted for a lighter tone with *Paradiso per 3 ore*, set in a ballroom where soldiers on leave and housemaids met during their spare time; similarly, Alberto Lattuada concocted a humorous, dialogue-less interlude, *Gli italiani si voltano*, about beautiful girls walking around town and arousing the interest of men, shot candid camera-style. Last but not least, there was Federico Fellini.[29] Unlike the others, the director of *I vitelloni* cheated, and invented from scratch the story for his episode, *Agenzia matrimoniale*—about a journalist (Antonio Cifariello) who conducts a report about a marriage agency—but told Zavattini that it was something that had happened to him personally. The episode has quite a different tone from the rest of the film, and Fellini's camera fascinatingly prowls through the corridors of a huge, decrepit condo, as the journalist wanders around looking for the agency. Marco Ferreri participated too, as both producer and organizer, and even cut out a small part for himself in Lattuada's episode, where he can be seen as a sweaty guy following a girl on the steps of the Trinità dei Monti staircase.

But *Lo spettatore* soon ended up in the drawer too. *L'amore in città* was a box-office flop, and the second issue, an inquiry into the adherence of society to the principles of the Gospel, provisionally titled *Cristo è vivo o morto?* (Is Christ Alive or Dead?), from an idea by Zavattini and with the participation of a large group of young filmmakers (Damiano Damiani, Francesco Maselli, Giulio Questi, Brunello Rondi, Florestano Vancini, Valerio Zurlini…) remained on paper. Meanwhile, the Neorealist experience marked time, judging from what emerged in a conference on the theme organized in Parma in 1953 by Ferreri himself, with the collaboration of Malerba and Antonio Marchi. Zavattini's theories about the radicalization of Neorealism collided with practical, economic, and ideological issues; but the finishing stroke came from the "arrogance of a political majority perched around power,"[30] which metaphorically cut the movement's legs and in fact its funding. Giulio Andreotti's public attack on Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D.* in the weekly magazine *Libertas* was emblematic: the Undersecretary criticized the movie for being "anti–Italian," writing that "if it is true that evil can be fought also by harshly laying bare its rawer aspects, it is also true that if, in the

world, it will be erroneously assumed that that of *Umberto D.* is Italy in the mid–20th century, De Sica will have done a very bad service to his homeland."[31] And even though De Sica himself claimed that he was sure that "Neorealism is just at the beginning," the Parma conference turned out to be a requiem for the movement, instead of a celebration.

For the rest of the decade Ghione kept a low profile: together with Attilio Bertolucci he was the artistic adviser on *Donne e soldati* (1955), directed by Malerba and Marchi, with Marco Ferreri as general organizer, which similarly had trouble with the censors. It was also the last project on which he and Ferreri worked together, before the latter, plagued by heavy financial problems, left for Spain, where he would debut as a director in 1958 with *El pisito*. In the following years Ghione's name appeared as scriptwriter on some titles with various fortunes. *Fiesta brava* (1956) was an Italian-Spanish co-production on the world of bullfighting directed by Vittorio Cottafavi, who left the film incomplete: the Spanish producer hired Domingo Viladomat to finish it, and the movie was released only in Spain, with the title *Toro brav*o, in 1960. *Il raccomandato di ferro* (1959) was a comedy directed by Marcello Baldi as a vehicle for the popular comedian Mario Riva, in one of his last film roles before his untimely death,[32] while *Fontana di Trevi* (1960, Carlo Campogalliani) was a musical comedy tailor-made for singer Claudio Villa, in which Ghione was surrounded by a half-dozen scriptwriters, including Giuliano Carnimeo and Gianfranco Parolini. He also started working in television, with documentary reports such as *Ravenna, città industriale* and *Viaggio lungo l'Arno*.

In the meantime, Ghione cultivated some projects for himself as director, which ended up in smoke, namely *Simón Bolívar*, scripted with the renowned playwright and journalist Federico Zardi and cancelled at the last minute by the producer, Dino De Laurentiis,[33] and *Una donna sposata* (A Married Woman). The latter film, written with Tonino Guerra, Letizia Antonioni and Sergio Perucchi, was to be produced by Focus Film on a budget of 130 million *lire*. For the protagonist, Ghione had thought of Silvana Mangano, but in early 1962 Monica Vitti was announced as starring in it in the press. However, the definitive cast included Enrico Maria Salerno, Marie Laforet, and Gian Maria Volonté. *Una donna sposata* was the story of a woman, Giulia, who is divided between her husband, Tonino, and the latter's friend Guido. The two men are poles apart: Tonino is inconclusive and apathetic, while Guido is an active and politically committed type (and a Communist too). Giulia is about to leave her husband, but when Tonino finds out about it, he asks Guido to lend him a huge sum of money, which he uses to take Giulia on an expensive holiday; then he even fakes a pathetic suicide attempt. Even though she despises Tonino and realizes that she can be happy only with Guido, eventually Giulia surrenders to her destiny of being a married woman. Ghione's intention was to make a pro-divorce film (divorce was not yet legal in Italy at that time: it would be introduced only in 1970), and the script included a rather risqué scene set in the sulphurous spring waters of Saturnia, where lovers bathe naked in full winter. Shooting was scheduled for March 1962, but ten days before principal production was to start, with the cast already paid and the crew ready to shoot, the producer backed out. But, at over 40, the times were almost ready for Riccardo Ghione to make his debut behind the camera. Once again, it would be a challenging project.

## The Children of the Revolution

On January 19, 1964, Franco Ghione passed away. Such a loss perhaps pushed his son to accept the legacy that the surname implied, and focus on his own directorial ambitions. The following year, finally, the much-awaited feature film debut took shape. The idea came to Riccardo from an episode he witnessed on the beach of Zoagli, near Genoa, when his two-year-old daughter came to blows with another child of the same age. "I thought I would draw from it for a story centered on children from one to three years of age.... I had seen Rossif's *Les animaux*[34] and I thought that, with the same eye which observes life in its documentary, but alive and penetrating aspects, one could investigate the world of children. The story came to me in the form of poetry: twelve pages of verses which spoke about them and their human world in a state of absolute innocence."[35]

Ghione convinced producer Leo Pescarolo and wrote the script with Luigi Malerba. When he claimed that *Il limbo* was a film that had no precedent in Italian cinema, he did not exaggerate. The movie starred fifty one-and-two-year-old children, whom the director used "to develop a discourse on today's society, an invitation to the marvelous freedom and genuineness of those mythical years, the nostalgia of that fatally lost Eden."[36] The limbo of the title is a sort of "childhood Polynesia, an authentic enchantment which will be dissipated through growth,"[37] a comparison that ideally brings the film closer to the libertarian instances of Italian cinema of the period. To explain the concept behind the project, Ghione quoted Henry Miller: "Every genuine boy is a rebel and an anarch. If he were allowed to develop according to his own instincts, his own inclinations, society would undergo such a radical transformation as to make the adult revolutionary cower and cringe." Nothing to do, then, with child-oriented products such as, say, *La guerre des boutons* (1962, Yves Robert): "I didn't want to make a psychological film, nor a movie for kids. It is a motion picture for mature, responsible adults. Nor did I film the children in real life, from afar, with telephoto lenses," he added. "I chose them and plastered them one by one, quite the opposite of the "cinéma-vérité" that I don't like, as I am convinced that a movie must be the result of an inventive effort, an attempt at expression after arranging the material in advance."[38]

It would take two years for the gestation to end: shooting took place in fits and starts, according to the possibilities and availability of the technical equipment, a necessary condition imposed by Pescarolo; and the filming sessions were very brief, because after one or two hours the children got tired. The finished film, just 62 minutes long, was a tale with lyrical and thought-provoking tones, which seemed like the filmed version of some ancient philosophical treatise. The first half puts together a series of paradoxes which represent the reversal of adult logic from the point of view of infancy's "irrational logic": for instance, a kid, upon seeing adults opening their umbrellas when it rains, believes that it is the umbrella that provokes rain. The second half is the demonstration of the theorem, with the "total desecration on the part of the child: in his habits, there are still no myths, nor binding memories, such as religion, death, sex, money, homeland, work." The movie ends with a child in a car that enters a tunnel, asking himself: "Will there be a hole on the other side?"[39]

Unfortunately, *Il limbo* had a fate appropriate to its title: it was announced at the

Critics' Week of the 1967 Cannes Film Festival, but it was replaced at the eleventh hour by Gianfranco Mingozzi's *Trio*; it was submitted to the censorship committee in October of that year, but was never released theatrically. As of today, it remains a mysterious object, which can be judged only from the original script (kept at Rome's CSC library) and the pre-release articles in the press, including a lengthy conversation with Ghione published in the magazine *Filmcritica*. The latter also includes a rather disturbing set still which explains Ghione's mention of the film including child nudes, "identifying a state of innocence and freedom, a demystified representation of sex."[40] Ghione claimed that the audiences of the private advance screenings felt a sense of sickness at the end, which was exactly what he pursued: "I wanted to show through children what adults are not anymore."[41]

While *Il limbo* languished, the director was already at work on another project, of a very different nature but not less ambitious, which drew from the changing cultural climate of the period to portray once again a sort of paradoxical *conte philosophique*. The working title, *La mischia* (The Shuffle), was later changed into *La rivoluzione sessuale*, in homage to Wilhelm Reich's *Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf* (translated as *The Sexual Revolution*), published in Italy only in 1963. The sexual revolution, as Ghione explained, was "the only revolution theoretically possible today," and the director stressed that he had concocted a tale with "developments based on rigorously scientific observations, made by scholars of this subject."[42] Sexology professor Emilio Missiroli (Riccardo Cucciolla), a follower of Reich's theories, involves a group of relatives and acquaintances in an erotic-sociological experiment: they retire to a hotel on the Maremma coast, closed for the winter season, and give way to a series of free love exercises, with sexual pairings decided, night after night, with the extraction of the names of the participants. The goal is to cure the neuroses caused by the rules of bourgeois society. But the experiment is short-lived: some fall in love, some become jealous, others flee, preferring the certainty of monogamy to the shiver of transgression. Soon the whole thing slips into the ridiculous, then it becomes tragic.

*La rivoluzione sessuale* was released near the end of 1968: it made decent business (more than twice as Bernardo Bertolucci's *Partner*, for instance), and earned even flattering reviews. Film critic Leo Pestelli, in *La Stampa*, wrote that Ghione was an avant-garde filmmaker, "not so much for the style but for the substance," and offered an acute allegorical reading of the film, which, he claimed, "is likely to be confused with the current erotic fad, something it doesn't deserve."[43] Unfortunately, it is exactly what happened to Ghione's film, at least in Italy—not in the immediate but later, during the savage rediscovery of genre cinema, when it was widely labeled as a pretentious erotic film, prudish-but-boring. A curio, a footnote, worth seeing merely for the appearance of a young Laura Antonelli, not yet the titular "Venus in Furs" in Massimo Dallamano's film, and with an unusual added value: the participation to the script of Dario Argento, which pushed many to look for similarities with the works of the director of *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (1970). In that period, Argento scripted other films with erotic undertones, such as *La stagione dei sensi* (1969, Massimo Franciosa) and *Metti, una sera a cena* (1969, Giuseppe Patroni Griffi); and the scene where Laura Antonelli is standing by the sea, surrounded by the hands of three adoring men, somewhat predates the flashbacks featuring Eva Robin's in *Tenebre* (1982).

And yet the focus of the film is closer to some Ferreri films, centered on the idea of a human microcosm forced to implode in a situation of forced seclusion, such as the underrated *L'harem* (1967), or the two-person drama *La cagna* (1972); moreover, the film's starting point and the sequence of the aphrodisiac banquet are surprising anticipations of *La Grande bouffe* (1973). In a scene of Ferreri's *Una storia moderna: L'Ape regina* (1963), Ugo Tognazzi comes across a reproduction of the notorious image of the *Lingchi* torture commented by Bataille in *Les larmes d'Eros* (not yet published in Italy), and Ghione shows a similar attention to the more thought-provoking cultural trends: Cucciolla's character makes use of an orgone accumulator ("In each house there should be an Orgone machine!"), three years before Dušan Makavejev's *W.R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971) and seven years before the amusing bio-electrical experiments described by Pasquale Festa Campanile in his dystopian erotic comedy *Conviene far bene l'amore* (1975). But Ghione took inspiration from famed literary models as well: Missiroli plans to lock himself with his disciples in the villa for ten days, like the protagonists of the *Decamerone*; and the love combinations between the characters are established by drawing lots, with a rigor which recalls the methodology employed by the Excellences in Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, also referred to by the characters' constant recourse to speech as means to reach excitation.

**Italian locandina for *La rivoluzione sessuale* (1968) (art by Rodolfo Gasparri).**

The director used to recall that, as soon as he got back from the States after filming *Zabriskie Point*, Antonioni wanted to see *La rivoluzione sessuale*, and was favorably impressed by it.[44] Nowadays certain surreal sequences appear dated if not amusing, such as the oneiric ballet with the actors naked and with their bodies painted, or wearing colored wigs, or even wrapped in cellophane like in a Bava film; and the tourist footage in the middle drags the movie down. But Ghione portrays his desperate bourgeois in search of an impossible escape with mordant perfidy, underlined by Teo Usuelli's openly ironic score: some get aroused reading *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, some listening to Beethoven—and a memorable scene features various erotic approaches accompanied by the Fifth—and some play doctor and nurse in the hope of reviving their sexual routine.

*La rivoluzione sessuale* reprised the theme, already touched on *Il limbo*, of a new society, free from the binds of moral and social rules. Pestelli, in his review, offered an interpretation of the plot seen as the analysis of a revolt destined to failure, whose

parable paraphrases that of the French Revolution: the summoning of the Estates-General (the meeting in the deserted hotel), the Storming of the Bastille (the first night of free love, with the participants enjoying their proclaimed rights), the first cracks among the revolutionaries, the desertions, the constitution of the remaining ones in a Committee of Public Safety, the inevitable disorder, violence and, eventually, Restoration. According to Pestelli the allegory was, in short, "a "ballad of sin," that is … a judgment, or rather a trial, celebrated through fake consensus." The style was countercurrent too, with a camera that "doesn't do any acrobatics, and faces firmly, loyally, the aberrant content. Even this, among so much "Godardism," is not unpleasant."[45] But the character of Emilio Missiroli, expertly played by Cucciolla, seems also physically an *alter ego* of Ghione himself, who had likewise dreamed the impossible enterprise of a revolution based on the free coupling (of minds instead of bodies) and the fecundation of the brains, so as to create a community in complete mutual tune. A self-portrait halfway between self-pity and auto-da-fè, with a mocking and pessimistic morale—an ending accused by some of hypocritical moralism—affected by the director's bitter personal vicissitudes. This trail of bile drips into Ghione's following film, the director's most caustic and unpleasant.

## *Cold Hearts, Dirty Minds*

In July 1971, Ghione completed filming for *A cuore freddo* (With Cold Heart), starring Enrico Maria Salerno and Rada Rassimov; the press of the period announced it as a drama "built on … a character of an unsatisfied and restless woman, avid of life and yet incapable of true love,"[46] as the title announced, and the director called it "the desperate story of a woman who lived her life in the wrong way."[47] Under such premises, this would seem the umpteenth reworking of Antonioni's favorite themes: but already from the opening credits, with Stelvio Cipriani's bouncy piano-oriented score accompanying the magnified details of a 10,000 *lire* banknote, the viewer realizes that the tone is similar to the previous film. Once again Ghione puts together some characters/functions, whom he then maneuvers, by deflating their convictions and delusions before the evidence of everyday life. The script builds around the two poorly matched spouses—a rich banker and the ex-hippie girl whom the man seduced with the mirage of wealth—in a *jeu de massacre* which at times recalls Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs*: Enrico Salvari (Salerno) is a middle-aged Severin, balding and on the way to andropause, while Silvana (Rassimov) is a Venus in miniskirt, who does not handle the whip but knows how to damage her man where it hurts most. The relationship between them is a twisted tangle of psychological tortures, retaliations and traps: Enrico is submitted to the woman, who doesn't lose any opportunity to make him pay for having led her to betray her ideals.

The targets are obvious. After predicting the failure of the sexual revolution, Ghione turned his cannons on the shallow protesters and turncoats, such as the character of the painter who makes "religious paintings," that is giant portraits of banknotes and Dalí-style half-melted coins, and is given lines of dialogue such as "We should eliminate surnames … think, what a revolution. Suddenly we'd all be equal!" But the director

aimed also at the ex-hippie girl who finds herself attached to money, and at the beast-like '68 rebels who, instead of peace and love, practice rape and ultraviolence. On top of that, he dripped poison over the main male figure, with the help of Salerno, here playing one of the most squalid characters in his career. Salvari is a middle-aged momma's boy, who buys a wife with his money but then succumbs to his scarce virility and undergoes one humiliation after the other, as when Silvana finds him masturbating in bed. As the woman says, burying him under an epigraph that is more like a tombstone, "Males are divided into men and husbands … my husband is a husband." In his childish and loser essence, Salvari is homologous to poor Missiroli in *La rivoluzione sessuale*, but without even the alibi of a project, a dream to believe in. He would, however, make an interesting case study for the Reichian sexologist, for the way in which he associates sexuality with the exercise of economic power. First, he charms Silvana, showing her how to decuple her capital by playing the market, within a handful of seconds: as if to say that capitalist mentality is calibrated for *eiaculatio praecox*. Then, after a sexual debacle during a trip to the countryside, he recovers excitation after asking for a temporary shelter in a farmhouse, and makes love with Silvana in the farmers' bed, while the latter are having lunch with beans and cheese in the very same room, divided into two—a dining area and a bedroom—only by a tent.

Upon its release, in November 1971, some critics labeled *A cuore freddo*, albeit kindly, as a "grand-guignol comic book, a fierce match between a husband who is not good in bed and a wife … who doesn't have manners at table."[48] This time the style drew a lot from the current fashion, with a dynamic editing (by director Fernando Cerchio, with whom Ghione had worked on the 1952 comedy *Il bandolero stanco*), characterized by brief, fragmentary flashbacks that pop up during the narrative and continuously sabotage the chronology, repeated images in the style of Bruce Conner and *Easy Rider* (1969), disorienting cuts. It was a superficial, insecure attempt, but still it was something. But audiences who expected conventional and rancid bourgeois drama—in a decade where the discourse on incommunicability could serve Antonioni as well as a *giallo*, *Tutti i colori del buio* (1972, Sergio Martino)—were not prepared for an unexpected, sleazy twist. On the way to pay visit to Salvari's mother, the couple is assaulted during a rest in the woods by the woman's ex-companions, and gang rape ensues, in a scene which seems lifted from some *rape & revenge* flick of the period, such as *La lunga spiaggia fredda* (1971, Ernesto Gastaldi). Those waiting for a cathartic revenge à la *Straw Dogs* (which was released in the States in December 1971 and in Italy in early 1972) were shocked by the cynical twist that Ghione imprinted to the tale. In its blending of *auteur* pulsions and concessions to the genre, *A cuore freddo* predates films such as *Autostop rosso sangue* (1977, Pasquale Festa Campanile), in a crescendo of sarcastic ferociousness which leaves the viewer dumbfounded still today. It turns out that Silvana organized the assault, in cahoots with the gang members, whom she offers to pay with her husband's money. They contemptuously refuse and leave. Silvana then shoots her husband point blank, heavily beaten by the thugs and still lying unconsciously on the ground: the murder will be pinned on the hippies. She returns to her empty villa, which now belongs to her, a prisoner of her own wealth.

Soon after completing *A cuore freddo*, Ghione was already at work on a new film, provisionally titled *Vampiro 2000*, shot in the village of Fiorenzuola d'Arda, near

Piacenza, and announced a project of a totally different kind: an adaptation of *Il male oscuro*, the controversial autobiographical novel published in 1964 by Giuseppe Berto, which became a literary case in Italy and was awarded prestigious prizes. A long-nurtured project, with a script that drastically rewrote the novel, it was to be shot in Milan starting in September 1972, and starring Ugo Tognazzi.[49] Ghione shortened the parts that Berto's novel dedicated to the relationship between the protagonist and his father, pruned those set during Fascism and in the movie business, and concentrated mainly on the protagonist's conjugal neurosis, thus ideally latching on the two previous films. He chose a flashback structure that traced back the main character's unhappiness, starting from his conversations with a psychoanalyst, whom the man consulted after an argument with his wife. Ghione had in mind to turn the second part of the novel into a road movie of sorts: even though the man is judged as healed, he turns his neurosis into a psychosis, and during a trip through Italy, from Milan to Reggio Calabria, "he leaves behind shards of his own existence: visions of factories, cemeteries, cars, memories, facts of life scroll away. Everything is left behind by the passage of the vehicle that drives to Calabria, everything of him and his past gets lost along the road. And gradually he reaches absolute purity."[50] From the articles that appeared in newspapers, it turns out that Berto was not very happy with the changes in his work, but perhaps there were other, and heavier economic reasons, that dragged the project down. Eventually, the movie never materialized, like many other lost dreams in Italian cinema. To Ghione, it was another burning disillusion. Eventually, Mario Monicelli would adapt *Il male oscuro* to the screen, starring Giancarlo Giannini and Emmanuelle Seigner, and with quite a different narrative approach, in 1990.

For *Vampiro 2000*, which eventually became *Il prato macchiato di rosso*, the director resorted to a plot which mixed elements from the Gothic genre, the thriller and a little bit of science fiction, spiced with ample doses of eroticism and served as a political fable of sorts. As the working title implied, Ghione's are modern day vampires, who literally steal the blood from the lower classes (prostitutes, tramps, gypsies, hippies) and sell it back to the Third World, where the ongoing state of war results in continuous demand for the vital fluid: as Nina (Marina Malfatti) explains, "Blood is worth quite a lot, you know? More than oil, more than gold…."

The concept of upper-class bloodsuckers, which drew back to *I vampiri*, found fertile ground after the 1968 turmoil, from the political allegory of *… hanno cambiato faccia* (1971, Corrado Farina) to the biting satire of *Il cav. Costante Nicosia demoniaco ovvero: Dracula in Brianza* (1975, Lucio Fulci), but the way Ghione's film deals with it is bizarre to say the least. The trio of wealthy "vampires"—Nina, her crazy husband Alberto (Enzo Tarascio) and the former's brother Alfiero (Claudio Biava)—are wine dealers who smuggle blood inside wine bottles, and drain their victims by way of a tin robot which looks like it just stepped out of some bad 1950s sci-fi flicks.

In *A cuore freddo*, Ghione portrayed the hippies and the wily upper-class couple with the same nihilistic contempt; here, the joint smoking, guitar playing, free love-making young couple become the good guys, whereas the villains are rich fascists who listen to Wagner ("I love German music very much, it makes us feel bigger, more important … it is undoubtedly a music for a superior race," Nina comments), nurture perverted sexual whims and claim that "only money gives happiness."

Beneath the anticapitalistic discourse and the decadent vision of bourgeois family (Nina despises her husband and has an incestuous relationship with Alfiero), there is a heavy satirical undercurrent at work. Tarascio's character is a grotesque mad doctor with a lab full of body parts and weird machinery, who delivers crazy monologues and has a fixation with automatons and robots. His outstanding, gigantic, colorful bow-ties, neurotic behavior and incoherent monologues ("I have come to the conclusion that nature is imperfect. We must provide to modify afterwards what nature has created, the dynamics of automatisms … this is perfection!") make him an openly caricatural figure. He is a man-child, only one step behind *La rivoluzione sessuale*'s Missiroli and *A cuore freddo*'s Salvari, who plays with robots like a grown-up kid and keeps a doll house of sorts in the garden.

This time Ghione inserted openly commercial elements into the film, dutifully obliging to the quota of eroticism which seemed to be the fundamental quality for a genre picture to be released in the *mare magnum* of the Italian market. The sexual revolution dreamed by Missiroli had given way to a spate of explicit onscreen sex, that would soon lead to hardcore porn. Therefore, the bare-bones plot, which in parts recalls Alain Jessua's *Shock Treatment* (*Traitement de choc*, 1973), is fleshed out with ample doses of naked flesh, and includes a psychedelic orgy scene inside a room covered with mirrors whose access is shaped like a gigantic vagina—a nod to Niki de Saint-Phalle's notorious 1966 sculpture "La Hon" (and to Piero Schivazappa's *Femina ridens*)—to the sound of Teo Usuelli's outstanding score. The out-and-out horrific moments are few and far between, namely a scene where the hippies find blood-drained victims amassed in an underground cell (a scene vaguely reminiscent of Bava, but which also recalls the surreal excesses of *La rivoluzione sessuale*) and the robot's gory blood-draining practices by way of a mechanical suction pump.

All this is interspersed with scenes showing a UNESCO agent (played by Nino Castelnuovo) investigating the blood smuggling ring, which makes for blatant plugs for a local winemaker and assorted awkward dialogue bits featuring Castelnuovo with local non-actors in small roles, plus a scene in which a vital clue to the solution of the mystery comes in the form of a bottle of Chivas Regal whisky.

The most interesting aspect is the presence of Lucio Dalla, one of Italy's most talented singer-songwriters, as the ugly-looking, balding, bearded tramp who always has a bottle of wine at hand. Dalla (who also sings the pleasant titular folk-rock number under the opening credits) seems to be fully aware of the film's satirical undercurrent, which comes to the fore in the scene where Tarascio's mad doctor illustrates to him his vision of the *übermensch*: "Man is shit! From tall, blond, rangy, you see, he became dark, short, fat, ugly, hairy … and he sweats too … like you!"

Overall, *Il prato macchiato di rosso* is frankly indefensible, both because of the shoestring budget and the overall ramshackleness; on the one hand, it aspires to be a metaphor, and on the other it bows dutifully to compromise for profit, to careless slovenliness, to cheap product placement. The impression is that Ghione as a director was as lost as his father was during the unfortunate experience in Detroit. Nevertheless, it takes a good dose of shamelessness to make a movie like *Il prato macchiato di rosso*—a quality also handed down from father to son. "I learned it from my father, as well as from Zavattini: when you direct a movie, you don't have to have any shame. If you have it, you're ruined."[51]

Predictably, *Il prato macchiato di rosso* disappeared from sight almost immediately, and seemed to retain only a marginal notoriety in the village of Fiorenzuola, where the memory of the shooting is still vivid.[52] It was Ghione's last film as a director.

**Original Italian poster art for *Il prato macchiato di rosso* (1973). The incongruous figure on the left, wielding a machine-gun, is recycled from the poster for *Svegliati e uccidi* (1966, Carlo Lizzani).**

## *Epilogue: After the Revolution*

After a decade of silence, the name Riccardo Ghione turned up again in the mid–1980s, as a scriptwriter (mostly in team with others) on a number of films characterized by the common denominator of eroticism. He worked with Salvatore Samperi (*Fotografando Patrizia*, 1984; *La Bonne*, 1986), Gabriele Lavia (*Scandalosa Gilda*, 1985), Tonino Valerii (*Senza scrupoli*, 1986); he wrote scripts also for Aristide Massaccesi (*Delizia*, starring Tinì Cansino, characterized by jaw-dropping dialogue full of laughable juvenile slang), Carlo Ausino (*Senza scrupoli 2*, 1990), Pino Buricchi and Riccardo Sesani (*Belle da morire*, 1992), Bruno Gaburro (*Casa di piacere*, 1989). In 1989 the magazine *L'Europeo* reported the news that Ghione was at work on a script titled *Il maschio più bello*, from a story by Barbara Alberti, but the project died in the cradle, like so many others; years later, the director explained that he had lost interest in cinema, and approached philosophy and literature, with the idea of a book on a madman, titled *Riassunto di un uomo*. Among the last projects for the big screen there was a script on the Greek mathematician and inventor Archimedes, also destined to oblivion.

Then came the last hurrah, *Diario di un vizio* (1993), which marked the reteaming with Marco Ferreri, with the latter behind the camera in his second-to-last movie (Ferreri died in 1997). It was a return to the origins, with a film that explored both men's obsessions, from the problematic relationship with the opposite sex to the meticulous recognition of everyday life, set in Rome—often unrecognizable, and therefore even more real than usual. It is hard to say how much of the story came from Ghione, who is creditor as co-scriptwriter, but the idea of the diary found behind a wall, which leads

the audience to follow the squalid existence of Benito Balducci (comedian Jerry Calà, cast against type in a dramatic role), an immature, proletarian playboy who goes from one affair to the next, recalls the true stories requested by Ghione and Zavattini for the various episodes of *L'amore in città*. "That's why I love the film: because there is no dramatic construction, it always remains at the beginning of things."[53] It is Ferreri speaking, but it could well have been Ghione.

Over the years, thanks to the DVD release of *Il prato macchiato di rosso*, the figure of Riccardo Ghione has become familiar among the young cinephiles, who don't know what to do with Neorealism and *Documento Mensile*, and are puzzled with those strange and obscure films, so difficult to catalog into the water-proof compartments of genres. On the other hand, when the adventure of the newsreel that never was or *Lo spettatore n. 1* are discussed, other and more prestigious names are at the center of the debate: Ferreri, Visconti, Zavattini. When asked about Ferreri in 1999, during a conference on Zavattini, Ghione replied almost annoyed: "Ferreri's role? It didn't exist. He was only a production supervisor. In fact, I can say that he even damaged me on various occasions,"[54] he added, recalling that day when he and Ferreri managed to get an appointment with Luchino Visconti thanks to Attilio Bertolucci's intermediation, at Castel Sant'Angelo, at 8 o'clock in the morning. Visconti was already there, Ghione arrived on time, but Ferreri was nowhere in sight. And the director of *La terra trema* (1948) started getting nervous. Time passed, Luchino was getting angrier by the minute, and Ghione was desperate: it was the chance of a lifetime, and he was making a bad impression. Eventually Ferreri showed up, as if nothing had happened, with an hour's delay: since he slept on benches, he didn't have any alarm clock. Speaking of Zavattini, on the other hand, Ghione used a fitting metaphor: "He vampirized me a bit, also because of my laziness, my lack of will to appear…."

This is perhaps the core of the matter. Riccardo Ghione was never a great filmmaker, but in his own way he tried to leave an imprint, a sign, a document. He had revolutionary ideas, but he lacked the spirit of the revolutionary. "Since I was almost completely devoid of any ambition, and being enormously lazy, I did a lot less than I could have done,"[55] he justified himself with that tip of self-celebration typical of many of his colleagues. Then he just wasted away, like many others, perhaps disillusioned, or understandably interested in making dough, wavering between his own private obsessions and lost opportunities. An *auteur* that was never born, who remained in a limbo like his most heartfelt projects; and like many other intellectuals who approached the film industry with somewhat disappointing achievements, his figure and work were destined to misunderstanding and suppression.

As a corollary to such an elusive career, the few photographs depicting Ghione are often blurry or poor quality, marked by time and preserved in the pages of old magazines. Such as the one, little more than a stamp, which shows him at the time of *Documento Mensile*: not a handsome man, but elegant, with glasses framing an ample forehead and an intellectual face, a wealthy man rather than a movie hack. Two more pictures, even more significant, reveal his nature of observer, in a defiled but privileged position—of a medium, a catalyst: he can be glimpsed behind Alberto Moravia while the latter is shooting *Colpa del sole*, as he studies the scene, absorbed; and in Parma, in 1953, during the conference on Neorealism, between Cesare Zavattini and Marco

Ferreri. Zavattini, comfortably sitting on a couch, is presumably engaged in an interview; Ghione watches him attentively, crossed legs and cigarette between his fingers; sitting in front of them, leaning indolently on a chair, chubby and shabby, Marco Ferreri listens, looking rather puzzled, and perhaps a bit bored. Three figures that represented three conceptions of cinema and for a certain period traveled along the same path, before choosing to explore different worlds. Among them, right at the center of the picture, an empty space. The one where ideas live, proliferate, blend, and breed.

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## Riccardo Ghione—Essential Filmography

1953 *L'amore in città* (P)
1959 *Il raccomandato di ferro* (SC)
1960 *Toro Bravo* (SC)
*Fontana di Trevi* (SC)
1967 *Il limbo* (D, S, SC)
1968 *La rivoluzione sessuale* (D, S, SC)
1971 *A cuore freddo* (D, S, SC)
1973 *Il prato macchiato di rosso* (D, S, SC)
1984 *Fotografando Patrizia* (S, SC)
1985 *Scandalosa Gilda* (SC)
1986 *Senza scrupoli* (SC); *La bonne* (SC); *Delizia* (SC)
1989 *Casa di piacere* (S, SC)
1990 *Senza scrupoli 2* (SC)
1991 *Una donna da guardare* (S, SC)
1992 *Belle da morire* (SC)
1993 *Diario di un vizio* (SC)
2001 *Il conte di Melissa* (SC)

# 4

# Giulio Questi—The Man with Nine Lives

Many people are born, spend some time on this planet and die, but they do not truly live in the fullest sense of the term. They simply let existence carry them on and are content to go with the flow. Not Giulio Questi. He had the privilege to live many lives, not always easy, not always pleasant. But he lived them fully. Even though his output as a filmmaker might seem scarce on the surface, with only a handful of feature films for the big screen, Questi's work is among the most original, innovative and varied in Post–World War II Italian cinema. In his youth, he was an accomplished documentarist and a capable scriptwriter, and after his experience in cinema ended he became a capable director for the small screen; then, in his eighties, he reinvented himself once again as a fully independent *auteur*, with surprising results. But he was much, much more than that.

## *Partisan*

Born in the Lombard town of Bergamo, on March 18, 1924, Giulio Questi was the older son of a technical designer; his mother, despite having attended only primary school, as it often happened in early-to-mid 1900, loved literature, especially the great Russian novelists and the 18th century French writers. It was she who injected in her son the passion for books.

His father being an ardent anti–Fascist, it was natural for Giulio to enroll in the partisans. But besides ideological reasons, there was also a practical, urgent one: after September 8, 1943—the day of the armistice of Cassibile, when Italy surrendered to the Allies, leading to the Nazi retaliation and the occupation of the country on the part of the German troops—he had been called up to arms. Being already involved in the clandestine anti–Fascist net, for him it was safer to hide in the mountains.

During his first winter as a partisan, Giulio had to struggle not only against the Nazis, but also against the cold and hunger in the icy Alpine valleys. Those were hard, adventurous times: at a certain point, he was even summoned by the National Liberation Committee and sent to Bologna, to forge fake identity cards for Jewish people, before returning to the mountains. At only 20 years old, he had been marked by the horrors of

war: he lived a life in constant peril, hiding and moving from one hideout to the next, and often seeing his companions die next to him in action. Death had become a constant presence, almost a tangible one, in his life. The horrors of war settled in his memory for decades, and often nurtured the soil on which his own movies germinated.

As Questi wrote,

> You don't have the time to feel anything: if you kill because you're about to be killed, you are full of adrenaline and you don't really think about it.... Twenty or even fifty years later, many things come to the surface all of a sudden, sometimes just a single, terrible photographic detail which explodes in the mind: anguish, fear, horror, no more war, never again to be twenty! ... Yes, you curse your twenty-year-old self! Memory is much more aggressive and cruel than reality.[1]

**Giulio Questi on the set of *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*. The bleeding scar on his left cheek was caused by one of the many chickens employed in the film (courtesy Nocturno Cinema).**

In the spring of 1945 Italy was liberated, but the return to normality after the war was not easy. The dream of freedom that Giulio and other young men like him cultivated while fighting the Nazis proved mostly illusory. Twenty years of Fascism could not be erased as if nothing had happened, and the wheels of the bureaucratic apparatus began to turn around again. Those who, like Questi's family, had come out of five long years of war penniless and exhausted, had to start a new life all over again in dire straits. Many did not stand such a burden, and the criminality rate rose dramatically: still, this was something which could not be openly depicted in the movies, given the strict censorship on the part of the ruling party, Democrazia Cristiana: Pietro Germi's *Gioventù perduta* (1947) was initially banned and then heavily censored because of that.

Questi's love for literature saved him: to pay for his University studies, he sold his guns to some guy in Milan, most likely a gangster. Without any weapon at hand, the temptation of illegality was defeated ... almost. For some time, the angry young man even considered expatriating in Sweden or Venezuela, but eventually he decided to stay, and face a new challenge. The post–World War II years were a cultural boiling cauldron, "a widespread ferment of projects that came and went, turned into something else, slipped out and then turned up again under different shapes. All was frantic and vibrating, and sometimes crazy." Those who nurtured artistic ambitions felt reinvigorated, and determined by the seemingly endless possibilities at hand, despite the lack of money and the heavy heritage of the war.

Giulio threw himself headfirst in the cultural world of his hometown, Bergamo. He co-founded a literary and political journal, openly leftist and anticlerical, *La Cittadella*, which came out for a couple of years and featured a number of renowned

contributors. Even Pier Paolo Pasolini sent his poetry to the editorial staff in the hope of being published, but Questi and his fellow editors rejected them, for a very good reason: the poems were written in the Friulian dialect, which sounded utterly incomprehensible to them.

## *Documentarist*

But Giulio's true passion was filmmaking. After graduating in Philosophy and Letters, he and Corrado Terzi founded a movie club, also called *La Cittadella*, which led to the making of a 12-minute documentary, *Città alta* (1949), co-directed by both friends: shot in the old part of the director's beloved Bergamo, an architectural beauty which enchanted even Le Corbusier when Giulio once accompanied him on a tour around town, the short film found many admirers and ended up at the Venice Film Festival. This led to the two young directors being commissioned a handful of documentaries: *Cortina*, *Sicilia*, *Vita di ogni giorno* (released in 1950), and *Viareggio* (released in 1952). With the exception of *Vita di ogni giorno*, centered on the daily life of factory workers in Milan, these were tourist shorts, shot by a minuscule crew of three: Questi, Terzi, and cameraman Enzo Oddone. Making documentaries was little more than a pastime, though: to make ends meet, Giulio taught for a couple of years in elementary school. Then he took the decision that changed his life: he moved to Rome.

It was 1950, and the 26-year-old Questi was anxious to meet Luchino Visconti: he had written an article in the socialist newspaper *L'Avanti!* on the director's Neorealist masterpiece, *La terra trema* (1948), and Visconti had liked it very much. In the Capital, he got involved with a small group of young intellectuals—Riccardo Ghione, Marco Ferreri, Luigi Malerba, Teo Usuelli—who were planning a revolutionary adventure: *Documento Mensile*. The result, as explained elsewhere in this volume, was disappointing, but the young aspiring filmmaker got the chance to meet other kindred spirits and find work in the movie business. Mario Soldati hired him to rewrite (uncredited) a few scenes for Alberto Lattuada's *Anna* (1951), and Valerio Zurlini called Giulio to be his assistant on some documentaries: *Il blues della domenica sera* (1951), *Soldati in città* (1952), *Il mercato delle facce* (1952) and *Serenata da un soldo* (1953). Then he took part in the scripting of *Guendalina* (which Zurlini was to direct, only to leave the project to Lattuada) and *Le ragazze di San Frediano* (1954), on which he was also assistant director. Questi would collaborate again with Zurlini in 1965, as second unit director on *Le soldatesse*. Working on *Le ragazze di San Frediano* was an important occurrence for him: during pre-production, he met costume designer Marilú Carteny, and they got married in 1954.

The experience with Zurlini led Giulio to make his first documentary on his own, *Donne di servizio* (1953), about the ordinary life of housemaids in Rome. In the following years he directed nine more documentaries, which established him as one of the more promising Italian non-fiction filmmakers: *Giorni di fiera* (1955, his first in color), *Pappo, Peppe e Pippo in un giorno di paga* (1956), *Argini (Omaggio al Tevere)* (1957), *Giocare* (1957), *Viaggio nelle terre basse*, *Amsterdam* (both 1958, filmed in Holland), *Valdarno '58* (1958), *Om ad Po* and *L'avamposto* (both 1959).

Questi's documentaries had a strong social and humanistic flair. *Valdarno '58*, about a modernized lignite mine, depicted the consequences of the mechanization of work on the population of the nearby village, consisting mostly of miners who would lose their job, while *Om ad Po* and *L'avamposto* explored the lives of the inhabitants of the delta of the River Po, who often chose to escape from the cities and live a life of fatigue, poverty and solitude in the wilderness. Questi recalled the harsh conditions that accompanied the shooting, in what at that time was one of Italy's poorest areas, in cold mid-winter, with beds and sheets moist with humidity and scarce food. *Giocare*, which focused on children's games as a "vehicle and acquisition of the sensible world," even won a Silver Ribbon as Best Short Film, the same year Fellini's *Le notti di Cabiria* was awarded with Best Film, Best Direction and Best Actress.[2]

## *Jack of All Trades*

During the same period Giulio was refining his skills, by taking part in major film projects. He was the assistant to Ettore Giannini (*Carosello napoletano*, 1954), Vittorio Gassman (*Kean—Genio e sregolatezza*, 1957), Francesco Rosi (*La sfida*, 1958), Gianni Puccini (*Il carro armato dell'8 settembre*, 1960, which he also co-scripted), Duilio Coletti (*Il re di Poggioreale*, 1961). The time seemed right for him to make his feature film debut, when producer Franco Cristaldi put him under contract and gave him *carte blanche* to develop a project. In late 1959 newspapers announced *Il gatto per la coda*, a movie about young delinquents: the title (literally "the cat by the tail") was a typical Bergamo saying, meaning that if you grab a cat by the tail, the feline will turn back and scratch you; in the director's words, "the hoodlums grab life by the tail, but life will take revenge upon them."[3]

But fate had it otherwise. *Il gatto per la coda* never got made, and Giulio made his debut in front of the camera instead. His role was small, but the film was not. It happened by chance: while strolling by near Piazza del Popolo in Rome, he and his friend Michelangelo Antonioni noticed a crowd assembled and huge lights illuminating the area, a sign that someone was shooting a movie nearby. "It must be Federico, let's go and say hello!" Antonioni proposed. "Federico" was, of course, Fellini. While Antonioni and Fellini were chatting amiably, Giulio noticed that the latter was eyeing him insistently. At a certain point the Maestro addressed him directly: "You're going to play a role in this movie. Yes, a Roman aristocrat, the landlord's son: you're perfect!" To which, Questi timidly replied: "But I'm not a Roman aristocrat.... I'm from Bergamo! I don't have anything to do with that!" But Fellini insisted. "Absolutely, you look like an aristocrat. Give us your number and we'll call you. You must come over—you're just perfect!" And so, twenty days later, Giulio Questi was at the Castle Bassano in Sutri, shooting a party scene for *La dolce vita* with Marcello Mastroianni, Anouk Aimée, and the German model-cum-singer Nico.

Fellini took Giulio in sympathy, and when he founded his own production company with Angelo Rizzoli, the first projects announced were Pasolini's first film *Accattone*, an "Italian Western" set in Veneto, directed by Rodolfo Sonego and starring Alberto Sordi, and Questi's feature film debut.[4] Needless to say, none of them saw the light,

except for *Accattone*, which however was eventually produced by Alfredo Bini, after Fellini backed out at the very last moment as he was worried about Pasolini's inexperience and unskillfulness as a director.

But in 1961 Questi got the chance to take part in an anthology film, a format in vogue at that time: *Le italiane e l'amore*, as the title stated,[5] was about Italian women and love. The idea came from Cesare Zavattini, who pursued his idea of cinema as a "stalking" of reality that had characterized previous projects such as *L'amore in città*, and the movie comprised twelve episodes (one of which ended up on the cutting room floor), inspired by true stories, often taken from letters to newspapers collected by Gabriella Parca in her book *Le italiane si confessano*. Parca's book had caused a sensation in Italy because of its frank treatment of such a scabrous issue as sex: Questi compared it to the Kinsey Reports. Besides Giulio, the other directors were Nelo Risi, Lorenza Mazzetti, Piero Nelli,[6] Francesco Maselli, Gianfranco Mingozzi, Marco Ferreri, Florestano Vancini, Carlo Musso, Giulio Macchi, Gian Vittorio Baldi. Questi's episode was *Viaggio di nozze*, shot in August 1961 in Naples, with non-professional actors.[7] It was about a man who discovers on the honeymoon that his wife is not a virgin, during the ferry trip from Sicily to Naples. It was the most praised segment by the critics, although the director was adamant that the best part of the film in his opinion was Marco Ferreri's *L'infedeltà coniugale*, "very simple, but so mature cinematically, without any formal quest, with a maturity of content."

Questi's second feature film was an anthology as well: *Amori pericolosi*. He came aboard at the eleventh hour, joining Carlo Lizzani and Alfredo Giannetti, and replacing a French director who had backed out from the project. As Giulio recalled, "The producers were Peppino Amato and Moris Ergas, then Amato died and the whole production was taken over by Ergas. Both insisted for Grand Guignol."[8] Shot in 1961, *Amori pericolosi* was released only in 1964, to little critical and commercial success. But it was a key experience for Questi. It was during post-production on *Il passo*, through Ergas, that Questi met a young editor who would become his best friend and his closest collaborator, Franco "Kim" Arcalli.

Born in Rome in 1929, from a Venetian family, Franco's real surname was Orcalli, but due to an error at the registry office he became Arcalli. He never bothered to correct it. Arcalli moved to Venice at five, after his father was killed by the fascists, and as a teenager, after the armistice, he collaborated with the partisans, where he got his nickname "Kim" (taken from Rudyard Kipling's novel). He got married very young and in 1952 he had a son. He started working in the movies as an actor, with a small role in Visconti's *Senso* (1954), then he became an editor thanks to Tinto Brass, with whom he worked on the documentary *Ça ira, il fiume della rivolta* (1962), and on Brass's first fiction film *Chi lavora è perduto* (1963), where he also played an autobiographical role. An anarchist, self-taught and curious, Arcalli lived his life fast and exuberantly, and as an editor he displayed the same daring approach, which he also applied to Questi's episode.

*Il passo* draws on elements of Edgar Allan Poe's psychopathological Gothic to convey a macabre, darkly humored moral fable reminiscent of Grand Guignol and riddled with symbols. Set in France, in the early 1910s, it is the story of a man, Garnier (Frank Wolff), who plans to murder his wife (Juliette Mayniel)—a wealthy woman who was

left lame after a horse-riding accident, with the help of his maid and lover Jeanine (Graziella Granata) The plan succeeds, but before dying the woman repeatedly shoots her rival in the leg. The man will have to live with another lame woman, whose presence will forever remind him of his dead wife.

The setting, characters and themes (the protagonist's obsession with the sound of his wife's orthopedic shoe is a nod to *The Tell-Tale Heart*), are all typical Gothic staples. Here, they are conjured up for a meditation on the nature of male desire as well as the relationship of mutual dominion between the sexes. The fetishistic details of the woman's lame step and orthopedic shoe are typically Buñuelian, and a nod to *Ensayo de un crimen* (a.k.a. *The Criminal Life of Archibaldo de la Cruz*, 1955), and the man's fixation with them is also a metaphor of his impotence. The bitter retaliation in the end conveys the story's pitch-black humor: the meek, unhappy wife eventually turns into her husband's tormentor, with a vengeance that will have its effects after her own death on both her scheming murderers, and the surviving woman is subject to a physical, social and psychological transformation that turns her into the mirror image of her victim. What is more, the new lady of the house finds herself another, younger lover—Garnier's young orderly, Jacques (Piero Morgia)—to satisfy her sexual needs that her husband cannot fulfill any longer.

All this is rendered in a rarefied manner: just four characters, a quick dramatic progression and a meticulous attention to detail. But it is the style that marks *Il passo*'s approach to the material, which goes through a radical stylistic reinvention of the subject matter: the result is a very unusual work for the period, strikingly experimental from the very opening sequence.

The story starts as if it were a straight Gothic tale, with an opening line that announces, "If your wife's step is too heavy don't kill her—another woman will come who will have the same step—if this step is inside you." It is followed by an atmospheric, otherworldly sideways tracking shot of the villa's exteriors at night as seen through the surrounding woods, to the sound of Ivan Vandor's creepy score. But Questi and Arcalli immediately conjure up a symbol-ridden oneiric scene which catches the viewer off-guard for its sheer audacity and complexity. Garnier dreams he is making love to Jeanine, when he is interrupted by an ominous sound which grows louder and louder; he wanders through the house in search of its source until he is so frightened by it that he hides in a laundry room amidst blinding white clothing. Then he locks himself up in another room: there, he first glimpses an orthopedic shoe on the floor, and then Isabelle giving him an accusatory stare. He kneels down behind the woman and starts tying her corset, while elsewhere Jeanine starts laughing. It is an extraordinary opening, lit and edited in an experimental style, with quick, disorienting cuts between close-ups and long shots, suggestive camera movements, expressionistic sound and overexposed lighting. The result owes much to the French *Nouvelle Vague*, and puts *Il passo* apart from its Gothic contemporaries, while in the meantime exploring the genre's stylistic potential for a more mature and self-conscious narration.

As critics Enrico Ghezzi and Marco Giusti noted, the episode features all the most typical methods of Arcalli's technique. "Flash-backs within flash-backs, the game of different spatial and time settings, an interlocked construction of the narrative, opening of the story with its dominant elements, a relationship music/editing always with a

narrative function, a succession of shots and sequences often by violent contrast, the overturning of the linearity of traditional cinematic narration even in the strict respect of the film's inner, circular logic."[9]

Questi and Arcalli maintain the same stylistic tension throughout the film, thanks to the frequent use of hand-held camera, and are immensely aided by Leonida Barboni's truly extraordinary lighting and cinematography. An outstanding sequence has Garnier recall his encounter with his future wife in a dilapidated church, rendered through a subjective shot of the man wandering through the ruins and the echoes of past voices that eventually materialize in a flashback, when Gerard is seen proposing marriage to Isabelle. The actors are also top notch, and Granata exudes a proud sensuality that makes her one of the most impressive female characters in Italian cinema of the period, at a time when Italian films, and especially anthologies, were obsessed with the theme of the eternal feminine.

As the director recalled, "*Il passo* made a great impression on the people of the movie industry because it was original, outside of any current canon: a cross between Buñuel's cinema and refined, decadent atmospheres *à la* Cocteau. It was a morbid, sick little film." Nevertheless, when it was finally released theatrically, *Amori pericolosi* passed unnoticed at the box-office and soon disappeared from sight. Critics were not kind either, although they partially salvaged Questi's segment. The renowned Alberto Abruzzese wrote: "The episode conveys an old and decrepit theme with a formal refinement that is between mannered decadence and misunderstood naturalism."[10] Stylistic experimentation, in the way Questi conceived it, was not particularly appreciated by reviewers of the period, who were also not too keen on the film's self-defined "Grand Guignol" quality.

Meanwhile, Giulio had taken part in a couple of projects of a very diverse nature. *Universo di notte* (1962), was a collection of night club numbers and stripteases assembled by producer Alessandro Jacovoni in the vein of *Europa di notte* (a.k.a. *European Nights*, 1958, Alessandro Blasetti); Questi was sent to Paris with d.o.p. Carlo Di Palma to shoot some risqué footage, including Loulou Santiago's striptease at the Crazy Horse. A review of the period summarizes what critics thought about this thread: "We believe that the success of these films is due to the sensationalist morbidity of the numbers, but most of all we think that there now exists a congenital mania to forcibly develop the cinematic spectacle in a contour of stupefying somnambulism, thus enhancing the corruption of taste and bringing today's individuals toward forms of barbaric coexistence."[11]

The Parisian night life—or rather, the box-office results of its depictions on screen—inspired Questi's next work, a low-budget documentary about the French industry of eroticism. "Seeing that everyone was making money with these films, except me, I decided to gain something myself.... I knew all the behind-the-scenes and the secrets of the night clubs. So, I wrote an outline and went back to Rome, looking for associates." He managed to involve in the project a couple of fellow filmmakers, Giuliano Montaldo and Elio Petri, and founded with them the company P3 G2 Cinematografica (a name which hinted at the filmmaker's names: the 2 Gs were those of Giuliano and Giulio, while P3 was a wordplay on 'Petri' which is spelled very similarly in Italian). Petri brought aboard his father-in-law, producer Lorenzo Pegoraro, as the financer. It

was an unlikely alliance: although all three of them were ardent Communists, Questi's idea of cinema was poles apart from his politically committed companions, who thought of moviemaking as an ideological instrument. On his part, Questi was adamant: "In my films I never wanted to deal with explicitly political or social topics, or rather, I never had the vocation to do that." The film, tentatively titled *Sexy Rififi (Una notte a Parigi)* (Sexy Rififi—A Night in Paris), was signed under the collective a.k.a. Elio Montesti, a mixture of the three filmmakers' names.

Questi and co. had managed to sign a distribution deal with Goffredo Lombardo's Titanus who would anticipate 30 million *lire*, but the company's financial difficulties caused it to back out, and forced the filmmakers to cut the costs drastically. Shooting, initially scheduled to start on February 25, 1963, was delayed to June 24 of that year, and the three associates of P3 G2 decided that they would not perceive any remuneration but would split the profits. The three directors traveled to Paris with two minuscule crews. The first one was comprised of Montaldo and Petri (who would be each other's assistant in turn, and Montaldo would also be Questi's assistant), and four others, including d.o.p. Giuseppe De Mitri. The second crew included Giulio as director, Montaldo as his a.d., cinematographer Ennio Guarnieri and three more technicians. The three directors concocted a tight shooting schedule: they stayed in the same hotel and took turns with the first crew going out to shoot while the second rested and vice versa, working around the clock to stay on budget. Petri returned to Italy on July 15, then on July 18, Montaldo and his crew moved to Nice to shoot at the local Casino, while Questi went back to Rome to film at the Luce studios in Rome, where some of the juiciest night club scenes were recreated in a very short period: from August 10 to 13 (the Lamine Touré ballet group scene), and from October 16 to 19 (the "sexual deviations" episodes). The title was eventually changed to *Nudi per vivere* (Nude to Live) and the film was submitted to the board of censors on November 8.

Despite the prestigious names involved, *Nudi per vivere* hardly differs from most "sexy night reports" of the period. It opens with tourist footage of Paris, while the voice-over (written by journalist Giancarlo Fusco, and recited by the popular voice actors Nando Gazzolo and Pino Locchi) adopts an ironic tone, cracking jokes and trying to be witty, but despite quoting the poet André Rivoire ("humanity is divided between Parisians and Zulus," quite a provocative way to begin the film at a time African countries were struggling for self- determination), the irony is shallow, and a moralistic tone soon prevails. The "interviews" with passers-by are obviously fake, and the haste with which the film was made is all too evident throughout. However, some risqué bits are indeed curious: one in which a client is waiting for a prostitute in a coffin has a surreal bite which predates both Buñuel's *Belle de jour* (1967) and Rondi's *Ingrid sulla strada* (1973). And the parts related to other weird aspects of Paris (an avant-garde show with a score by Chet Baker, homeless people in parks, a phone line for aspiring suicides) are more in vein with the sociological satire of the *Mondo movie* genre. The addition of archive footage, featuring Josephine Baker, Maurice Chevalier and Edith Piaf, adds interest to the whole.

*Nudi per vivere* was initially denied the certificate for screening by the board of censor. The motivation deserves to be reported at length, as it shows the mentality of the period toward eroticism on screen:

> There cannot be any doubt that this is a product aimed at stimulating the sexual appetites of the audience, and under this aspect alone it would already surpass the limits of the sexy films, which unfortunately have found an easy market and concur to increase the danger of continuous decadence of mores, from the point of view of decency and sexual morality. But the film also features more worrying and damaging elements, since—with the exception of a limited number of scenes, in which the spectacular and choreographic aspects prevail and distract the viewer's attention from the dancers' nudity—all the other scenes, from beginning to end, are imbued with a pornographic content which recalls and exalts the most vulgar sexual instincts, and can stimulate any tendencies to satisfy insane desires. And there is more: in addition to the effective sexual suggestion exerted by the innumerable scenes which highlight female nudity … there are sequences, and not a few, where sexuality is associated with aggressiveness and violence, and therefore there is the real danger that they might arouse and exalt sado-masochistic tendencies, latent in the viewer's unconscious. Elsewhere in the film, sadism and masochism are even highlighted … in a way which would be tolerable only if they were destined to a determined number of qualified people, for scientific purposes; again, other scenes describe seedy environments where sexual deviations and transvestism take place. The overall atmosphere of the film is heavily unpleasant, not only because of these latest aspects, which are decidedly in contrast with normal bio-psychic values, and for its prevailing dark tones, but also because of the deliberate degradation of any value in life, in terms of sexuality.

In appeal, the producer agreed to soften the tone of the voice-over, and trim a few scenes, namely those depicting "sexual psychopathies," as well as a scene where a little girl dances the twist, for a total of almost 9 minutes. Eventually the film passed with a V.M.18 rating, and was released in December 1963, around the same time as Petri's "official" third film *Il maestro di Vigevano* (starring Alberto Sordi and Claire Bloom). Much to the makers' enthusiasm, the grosses for the opening night were outstanding, but—as it often happened at that time—*Nudi per vivere* was immediately seized for alleged obscenity.[12] The press applauded the "blow to the vulgar and demeaning market of eroticism in color,"[13] and Pegoraro, as producer, went to trial. Fellini testified in his favor, defending the producer's morality and honesty,[14] and Pegoraro was acquitted, but the tribunal demanded the seizure of three sequences of the film, *Elle et lui*, *Grand-Guignol*, and *Boule noire*, the latter featuring a nude black dancer.[15] It returned into circulation in the summer of 1964, and it was met with rather favorable reviews for that type of film, with praise for its demystifying voice-over and Ennio Guarnieri and Giuseppe De Mitri's color photography.

Questi's destiny seemed to be linked with the sexy documentaries thread. Producer Maleno Malenotti hired him to "spice up" the footage shot in Africa by the noted Folco Quilici for *Le schiave esistono ancora* (1964), based on Robin Maugham's book. Questi filmed a couple of fake interviews in London, with a RAF pilot and an alleged "slave" runaway from a harem, and interviewed Maugham as well. Then, in Italy, he and Carteny reconstructed a phony harem at the Tirrenia studios, recruited members of the Yemeni community in the Tuscan town of Livorno to play Arab extras, and shot some mildly daring footage. What had started as a serious project had become an exploitation flick on the white slavery ring, much to Quilici's dismay: the documentarist disowned the film.

Time passed, and Giulio Questi seemed to be a jack of all trades, a useful and sometimes indispensable aid who sold his services behind the scenes: scriptwriter, film doctor, second unit director, occasionally actor. One of his scripts, *La donna del lago*, was a gloomy mystery based on a novel by Giuseppe Comisso, published in 1962 and in turn inspired by a true story, a series of murders that took place near the Alleghe

lake, in the Dolomites, starting in 1933. It would become a movie directed by Luigi Bazzoni and Franco Rossellini and starring Virna Lisi and Philippe Leroy, released in 1965. That same year, newspapers reported of a script he was working on with Spanish writer José Luis de Villalonga, *L'attentato*, to be directed by and starring Vittorio Gassman,[16] which ended up in a drawer; later that year he was shooting battle scenes in Montenegro for *Le soldatesse*, then he turned up on the set of Pietro Germi's satirical masterpiece *Signore & signori* (a.k.a. *The Birds, the Bees and the Italians*, 1966), for one of his rare stints before the camera. The jack of all trades had no rest.

## *Making a Western*

In the winter of 1965, finally the opportunity came for Giulio Questi to make his feature film debut. In that period, he and Arcalli were busy working on a script together. Questi's method for scriptwriting was influenced by his early days as a documentarist and editor. "Movies, to me, were written with the eyes, with the camera," he claimed. "Even later, when I wrote the scripts for my films, I always started with a skeletal editing outline, a numbered series of bare scenes where the only words that counted were the lines of dialogue." He and Arcalli worked as a team, continually discussing and inventing new ideas and visuals, and changing the outline at will by switching scenes. Then it would be up to Giulio to write it down on paper. As he himself explained, "Only at the end I fleshed it out a bit to make a version destined to the producer and the distributor." Rather than a working relationship, there was a close friendship bond between Giulio and Kim. The two men would go out every night, drinking around till morning, smoking and exchanging ideas and stories, hopes and dreams, until new projects emerged out of nothing. "They used to see us together at every hour of the day and the night, and they called us Jules and Kim, a nod to Truffaut's *Jules et Jim*," the director recalled.

Jules and Kim had concocted a weird story of eroticism, murder and passion, in the vein of one of Questi's favorite writers, Georges Bataille … but set in a chicken farm. They tentatively titled it *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*. They were excited, and ready to start looking around for a producer. Then Jacovoni showed up at their door. The good news was, they could finally make a movie; the bad one, it would *not* be the film they had in mind. "I'll be waiting for you in my new office tomorrow morning," Jacovoni explained. "You have the whole afternoon and night to think of something. Just write down 30 lines, a little synopsis would be sufficient. I've already signed a contract with a distributor and I don't want to lose this opportunity. Write a hell of a Western! Something great, hot, I'm counting on it!"[17] After Sergio Leone's *Per un pugno di dollari* (1964), every producer in town was putting together one Western after another, assembly-line, in a gold rush that would end not in the mountains of Arizona, but in the box-offices all over Italy. Even if it was a commercial compromise, it was too big a chance to let it go. And so, Jules and Kim set out to work on the Western script in a hurry.[18]

In May 1966 Questi was in Spain, shooting the provisionally titled *Gringo*.[19] The director had thought of the Almeria desert as the background for the most important scenes, but due to the budget shortcomings he had to do with an empty construction site on the outskirts of Madrid: "The bulldozers were excavating a couple of hills to

build a residential district, it was white, blinding soil. One month earlier I'd found green hills, one month later, a city!"[20] Extras were recruited among the hippies and ex-wrestlers hanging around Santa Ana square. Filming became an adventure on its own, and the director started feeling like a character from his own script. Near the beginning, he had an accident on horseback and crushed a vertebra: for days and days, he could only sleep on the floor, and had to be carried on the set by crewmembers. After ten days of shooting, Jacovoni left the movie, and Giulio remained in Spain with the local crew, the only Italian members being Franco Delli Colli and assistant director Gianni Amelio. "The Spanish thought I was mad, because I always asked for weird things," he recalled. Problems piled up, money was never enough, and the director could not even watch the dailies, which were shipped and developed in Rome.

One day, at his hotel bar, Giulio met another stranger in town: Orson Welles, whom he had fleetingly come across a couple of decades earlier while shooting his short film about Sicily. A decisive meeting, perhaps, although Questi was adamant that there was one very important thing he learnt from the American genius: how to drink whisky, which Welles consumed in a tall glass with plenty of ice and water, as a tonifying beverage for his mind to work better … this, at 11 in the morning.

**Italian locandina for the 1975 Italian rerelease of *Se sei vivo spara* (1967), under the title *Oro Hondo*.**

Even though *Se sei vivo spara* was born as a project on demand, this didn't prevent Questi from making it as personal as he could. The story seemed pretty ordinary on paper, with an unnamed, half-breed bandit (Tomas Milian) seeking revenge on an accomplice, Oaks (Piero Lulli), who betrayed him, took all the loot from a bloody robbery and left him for dead. But then everything turns nightmarish and surreal. The Stranger is saved by two Indians who literally make him return from the dead and heal his wounds via a magic ritual; then they forge bullets with gold which will make him invincible, and tell him that in return they expect him to tell them about the afterlife he briefly visited. Meanwhile, Oaks and his men reach a village after a long march in the desert, only to find themselves in a nest of vipers: the villagers dispatch them to get the stolen gold. Things get even weirder when the wealthy Sorrow (Roberto Camardiel) and his gang show up. They

kidnap Evan (Ray Lovelock)—the teenage son of bartender Bill Templer (Milo Quesada), who has seized the gold—and take him to Sorrow's ranch, and what looks like a Western version of a Roman feast ensues. The men greedily devour a gigantic roast pig, while Sorrow tells the puzzled Stranger things like: "Is there anything more virile than crime?," and "To eat, drink, and contemplate one's victim—there is nothing more sensual than that." As the gunslingers avidly eye the powerless, ephebic Evan, it becomes clear that they are going to gang rape the boy—which occurs off-screen: the next morning, Evan kills himself out of shame.

To many screenwriters and filmmakers, making Westerns meant leaning on the childhood memories of the many Hollywood and Poverty Row films that flooded Post–World War II Italy, when the American economic influence also meant a massive cultural invasion. The postmodernist essence of the Italian Western came from it being inspired by an inherited, foreign imagery, which was perceived and lived not as part of a country's history, but as some sort of wild and twisted fairytale, as Leone had shown. To Giulio Questi, however, a more direct source of inspiration came from his days as a partisan in the mountains. This is evident in the opening scenes, when Oaks makes the unnamed hero and his Mexican companions dig their own graves before gunning them down, a chilling image that recalls the many mass executions committed by the Nazis, with partisans and civilians summarily dispatched and buried in mass graves. Another symbolic reference was the gang of black-clad gunslingers at the service of the wealthy Sorrow, a nod to the Fascist paramilitary wing, the *camicie nere* (Blackshirts), as the director explained.[21]

Spaghetti Western filmmakers often experimented with form. Some of them more or less slavishly imitated Leone, others sought different paths: take, for instance, Tinto Brass's Pop Art/*fumetti* approach on *Yankee* (1966). Questi went for an almost abstract style, oneiric and hallucinatory: there is an abundance of details of objects that often get in the way in shots, leading to subtly unsettling frame compositions; the zoom is often paired with a tracking or panning, with dizzying results; the insistence on close-ups of eyes goes way beyond the typical Leone grammar of suspense, as in the unsettling sequence at Sorrow's ranch, where the game of looks between the Stranger and Evan suggests a bond that goes beyond words. As the director explained, "Invention came from desperation. We escaped from the genre. There was the spirit of manipulating genres in a Pop key. We were already in the same dimension as *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*. We also had the idea of a psychoanalytic reading for the characters."[22]

In the editing room, Arcalli emphasized the film's surreal qualities. The opening scene, in which Milian's character hallucinates and recalls the gruesome robbery in which he took part and the ensuing mass execution, when he and his Mexican friends were shot by their American gang members, is rendered via a series of machine-gun-like, blink-and-you'll-miss editing cuts, with a series of frames as fast as bullets, over-exposed as to become almost blinding. The result truly looks like a dying man's hallucinations under a hot sun, with the occasional surreal detail, such as the sight of a Mexican boy rolling down dead on the ground seen *upside down*, as the frame has purportedly been overturned. Later on, the Stranger is upset by the images of the hanged bodies of his former accomplices, and (in a smart nod to *Macbeth*) he keeps trying to wash away non-existing blood from his hands: again, the images come and go in

swarms—details of dead eyes, tongues out of mouths, bloody wounds. It is exactly the "single, terrible photographic detail which explodes in the mind," which Questi mentioned when recalling his own memories of the horrors of war. "Kim had a very rare talent and an incredible patience, he was a true artisan who managed to cut and paste together even just two or three frames, so as to give the scene a very fast pace.... We first tried this type of editing with *Se sei vivo spara*, in some scenes like the shooting of the Mexicans, which I love, all made with repeated frames." Music, paired with Arcalli's brilliant editing, had a key part as well: the impressive score, which made a brilliant use of horns, was again the work of jazz composer Ivan Vandor, whom Questi had known in the 1950s, when he was the saxophonist of the Roman New Orleans Jazz Band, depicted in Zurlini's documentary *Il blues della domenica sera*.

But what viewers remember the most about *Se sei vivo spara* is the graphic violence. Questi went for Grand Guignol with a relish previously unseen in the genre, even in such efforts as *Django* (1966, Sergio Corbucci). The most notorious scene has Milian firing six gold bullets into Oaks; the badly wounded bandit is taken to a doctor, who pulls out a bullet from his chest with no anesthetic whatsoever. When he announces that the bullet is made of gold, the other people standing around throw themselves on Oaks in a frenzy, and take out the other bullets from his body with their bare hands. Another grisly moment shows the scalping of an Indian in gory close-up, with torrents of very red blood coming down the victim's face and into his mouth. The over-the-top ending has the greedy Hagerman (Paco Sanz) die horribly, his face covered in molten gold. Unlike most Westerns of the period, violence becomes truly disturbing because it overturns the viewer's moral expectations: Questi's Savage West is a Bataille-inspired nightmare populated by monsters, all the more cruel as they are concealed under the appearance of respectability.

*Se sei vivo spara* was given a V.M.18 rating with no cuts. The Board of censors accepted Questi's explanation that "the film's rationale is devoid of any romantic attitude about violence but, in fact, it aims to condemn it by showing all the horror of its physicality." However, after less than a month after its release the film was seized for its "scenes of extreme violence"[23] which apparently had caused an elderly woman to faint. The magistrate ordered that the two most extreme scenes be cut, namely the bullet sequence and the scalping,[24] and the movie was put into circulation again in a cut form. Several years later, in 1975, an independent distributor acquired the negative and planned to release a shortened version. Questi jumped at the opportunity to restore the two scenes cut by the magistrate: the new edit was submitted to the censors with the title *Oro Hondo*. The film was quite successful abroad, especially in Germany and Japan; in the U.S. it was retitled *Django Kill—If You Live, Shoot*, and marketed as a sequel to *Django*, with which it had no relation whatsoever.

While *Se sei vivo spara* started its troubled commercial route, Questi and Milian were discussing another project together: *La rivoluzione*,[25] a political adventure story set in a Southern American nation, about a man who has lost his memory and is seeking traces of his own past during a revolt of the sugar cane cutters. It was based on a story Giulio had penned, titled *Più a fondo nelle foreste*,[26] and he adorned the tale with references to magic realism and drug culture: a vital part in the story was played by peyote, with hallucinatory psychedelic sequences. Milian was to be the only professional actor

amid unknown thespians or even non-professional ones. Some time later, Sergio Leone read the treatment and liked it: he got in touch with Questi about producing the film, but wanted popular American actors for the secondary roles. Giulio did not want to betray his original concept, and the project was shelved. Years later, he reprised it in a short story named *Mural*.

## *Experimenting with Genre*

In the summer of 1967, Questi could finally start production on *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*. He had finally found a pair of backers who would finance the film: Franco and Alberto Marras, two young and penniless but enthusiastic brothers who had cut a deal with the powerful Euro distribution. To understand how and why the film was born, one must keep in mind Questi's words: "I come from a critical culture based not on consensus, I came from the war: a movie should hurt someone, otherwise it wasn't a movie. Early Neorealism was like that, it hurt, and so … we adored it…. Then, on the contrary, came the period—and it still is like that—in which movies should absolutely hurt no one … that's why I made *Se sei vivo spara* and then *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*, precisely to annoy, to attack, to scare."[27]

Giulio and Kim concocted a weird tale that was meant to satirize the overwhelming industrialization and homologation, which involved the animate and inanimate—things, animals and human beings alike. "I wanted to make a film imbued with the literary suggestions of my favorite authors, like Bataille, and the cinephilic ones, such as *film noir*," the director said.

Like *Il passo*, *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* was another bizarre story of a murderous *ménage-à-quatre*. No longer in love with his rich wife Anna, the owner of an ultramodern chicken farm, Marco has an affair with his young cousin Gabri, who is staying at their villa. However, Marco is apparently a sex maniac, who tortures and kills women in a motel near the highway, while Gabri is actually in cahoots with a young copywriter, Mondaini, who has discovered Marco's secret. The two are lovers, and are planning to kill Anna and frame Marco for the murder: this way, Gabri will inherit Anna's wealth. But Gabri and Mondaini are unaware that Marco is not a serial killer: his alleged killings are merely sex games that he performs with local prostitutes. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to them, Marco is planning in turn to get rid of Anna by staging an accident at the chicken farm. When the murderous plan sets in motion, everything goes wrong: Mondaini kills Anna, and has Marco find her body at the motel, but Marco takes the corpse back to the farm in order to make it disappear. There, he accidentally ends up in the grinding machine. The police show up and arrest Gabri and Mondaini, blaming them for both deaths.

Filming started on June 30 and went on for a couple of months. The director chose to shoot the movie on the outskirts of Rome because "they best summarized, through the invasion of huge billboards, the omnivorous presence of the economic Boom." For the role of Marco, Questi chose Jean-Louis Trintignant, while Gina Lollobrigida (as Anna) was "suggested" by the distributor, Euro, who needed a name actress to sell the film. At first Giulio was perplexed with such an offbeat casting, since Lollobrigida was

popular in Italy mostly because of her roles in amiable "pink Neorealist" comedies such as *Pane amore e fantasia* (1953, Luigi Comencini). However, he never had any problem with the diva, although their relationship was rather cold, mostly on the director's part as he felt somewhat intimidated by "*la Lollo*"; and the 40-year-old actress turned out to be perfect as the ruthless entrepreneur (described in a dialogue as a "fucking bitch"), and exuded an astounding mature sex appeal. The role of Gabri went to Ewa Aulin, a 17-year-old Swedish actress who was forging ahead, after her roles in *Don Giovanni in Sicilia* (1967, Alberto Lattuada) and *Col cuore in gola* (1967, Tinto Brass, alongside Trintignant). Mondaini was played by Jean Sobieski, the son of a declined Polish prince who had debuted in *Strip-tease* (1963, Jacques Poitrenaud) and who would enjoy a brief career in Italy and France, with roles in such films as *... e venne il tempo di uccidere* (a.k.a. *And Then a Time for Killing*, 1968, Enzo Dell'Aquila), *Una sull'altra* (a.k.a. *Perversion Story*, 1969, Lucio Fulci) and *Playgirl '70* (1970, Federico Chentrens).

On the surface, *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* is a genre film, like *Se sei vivo spara* was. The plot is similar to the thrillers made around the same time by the likes of Romolo Guerrieri (*Il dolce corpo di Deborah*, 1968) and Umberto Lenzi (*Orgasmo*, 1969; *Così dolce ... così perversa*, 1969), and loosely inspired by the seminal narrative mechanism of *Les diaboliques* (1955, Henri-Georges Clouzot). Questi's film shares a similar emphasis on eroticism, with the ambiguous relationship between Anna and Gabri. But the director's approach to the material is both refreshing and thought-provoking, by making its content and narrative trappings ambiguous and elusive: the opening murder turns out to be fake, and the mystery plot is developed at the expense of the characters, who make all the wrong moves and end up inadvertently sabotaging each other, as the greedy campers of Bava's *Reazione a catena* will do. "Our game was precisely on the genre, not on the style. But it was a conscious game, and we were the first to attempt it," Questi claimed. "We boasted about making a kitsch cinema. Making a *giallo* with a story about chickens and casting Lollobrigida in the lead was a kitsch move at that time. Those were the years when we believed in a "pop" culture.... They laughed at us, and not only the critics. We were outside official cinema."[28]

The nods to 1960s French cinema and to Buñuel are also very much evident. The scene where the bored bourgeois play a risqué society game, by emptying a room of all furniture and locking couples inside it, brings to mind the vacuous society rituals of *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (1961, Alain Resnais) as well as *El ángel exterminador* (1962); on the other hand, Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Trans-Europ-Express* (1966) seems the logical antecedent for the sadistic pulsions of Trintignant's character. And perhaps, in the casting against type of its diva, Questi followed unconsciously the model of Godard's *Le mépris* (1962), an influence the director did not acknowledge, though. Interestingly, though, one of the major plot points—Mr. Mondaini eavesdropping on Marco in the adjacent room of the motel and mistakenly interpreting the meaning of what he hears—predates Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), which shares with *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* the theme of existential malaise in modern-day society.

Dario Di Palma's cinematography emphasized the Pop Art influence: Questi demanded a lighting similar to TV adverts and billboards, all bright colors and shiny surfaces. Lots and lots of white, starting with the chickens. But he and Arcalli pulled out all the stops when editing, adopting the same experimental attitude they had already

attempted in several sequences of *Se sei vivo spara*, with lightning-quick cuts, sometimes just one or two frames long. Such a procedure is applied to the disorienting, vividly gruesome flashback of the car accident in which Gabri's parents were killed, accompanied by the sound of a roaring engine and screeching tires. "Eventually editing became a stylistic principle, a true method," Questi explained. "I think we predated many ideas that later came into circulation."[29]

In this respect, the opening sequence at the motel stands out as a visual and rhythmic tour de force which deserves to be studied at film schools for its sheer audaciousness and originality. The actions of several individuals in different rooms are presented: a man puts eyewash into his eye, another combs his hair before a mirror, a half-naked woman looks out the window to the traffic-ridden motorway; a man is lying on a bed, another is smoking a cigarette, a third puts a plastic bag on his head and prepares to commit suicide; someone (who will soon be revealed as Marco) pulls out black gloves from a suitcase, an elegant young man in a pale blue suit nervously walks across the next room, a third one squeezes toothpaste into the sink. The black-gloved Marco then seemingly cuts a woman's throat, while the young man in the next room climbs atop a bed and listens to the screams from behind a wall. All actions are introduced and followed in their progression for their mere rhythmic value; they form visual patterns that alternate with a hypnotic rhythm, underlined by enigmatic, geometric camera movements. They deserve the same attention and amount of time on screen, regardless of their dramatic value (or lack thereof). Similarly, the following scene, with Marco driving away from the motel and being assaulted by the images of the huge street ads along the highway, is rendered via a frantic series of details—a woman's eye, a wheel, the Campari liquor logo—on which the camera zooms in, symbolizing the way publicity assaults our subconscious, paired with an uneasy, jarring music score.

The latter, by avant-garde composer Bruno Maderna—with whom Questi got in touch through Arcalli and their mutual friend, the prestigious composer Luigi Nono—is one of *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*'s major assets. Maderna perfectly captured the story's biting satiric angle, and underlined its experimental quality with his daring sound choices, ranging from faux-Brazilian pieces played on acoustic guitar and accompanied by scat vocals to bizarre, dissonant noises: "He conducted an orchestra in Germany. As soon as he arrived at the Fono Roma studio where we were recording, he was not content with the orchestra he found," Questi recalled. "He asked for metal sheets which he hit personally to produce weird metallic clangs, which we used for most of the film. For the chicken farm scene, he invented a language of his own, made with Caribbean assonances, by using repeated syllables and words. The more he invented, the more I was happy, because he met the film's inventions.... He created in total freedom music that interpreted the film, an open score on tap which we could cut and edit at will."

Questi and Arcalli's discourse turns explicitly political in the scene where the ex-farm workers (who were fired and replaced with machinery) gather outside the chicken farm and watch their former employers silently from a distance with an accusing air ("What are they doing now? We don't need them anymore!"); they predate the underground workers turning up on the surface in *Arcana*. Authority is also openly ridiculed through the depiction of the armed forces: the commissioner on the case, an obtuse and retrograde type who discovers the guilty couple by sheer chance, is the object of the film's final joke.

The expected stabs at bourgeoisie are more predictable. The party scene featuring the game in the "room of truth" is very much a product of its time, complete with such revealing lines as "We must liberate ourselves from the past, the present, and the future!." Some of the dialogue has an overly didactic edge, while Lollobrigida's lines about her character's fear of getting old and her will to regain her attractiveness to her husband, which lead to the woman posing as one of the prostitutes at the motel, are often purportedly silly ("Too bad that photographs aren't more like mirrors!" she observes watching her own portrait), a deliberate move on Questi's part to sabotage his glamorous lead actress.

Indeed, the film has a grim satiric vein, which keeps it relevant even today. It comes to the fore in the depiction of the ultra-mechanized farm (which comprises a "musical stimulator") and the marketing ideas associated with the chicken farm business ("We've got to utilize our publicity as if we were dealing in politics. We must use it like any other industry," a character stresses), such as the big egg in the middle of the stock market room and Mr. Mondaini's demented slogans. "Playboy poultry in smoking jackets at the poultry party," he enthuses. Cut to: Mondaini and the other guests at Marco's house, having a party.

Questi and Arcalli predated the socio-political science fiction of the late Sixties and early Seventies (*Eat It*, 1968; *H2S*, 1969, Roberto Faenza; *N.P. il segreto*, 1971, Silvano Agosti), but in this respect *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* has aged better than its peers, as in the film's most notorious scene, an unforgettable sight gag in which Anna and Marco discover a batch of mutant chickens, born wingless and headless: "It's all meat, and the bones are small!" the chemist enthuses; "This means a great reduction in costs! It'll bring radical changes to production." The ironic twist is that the mutant offspring—itself symbolically mirroring Marco, yet another deranged product of society, with his neuroses and manias—was likely the result of Marco clumsily messing things up in the lab and his pooch being accidentally grinded in the feed processor. Understandably horrified, and unconsciously pairing his own condition to that of the mutant chickens, Marco gorily destroys them, but the ending (with the man himself disappearing into the grinding machine too) implies that yet another generation of mutants will soon appear. It is hard not to think about contemporary globalized world, full of consumers born without head (that is, the capacity of developing independent thought) and wings (that is, imagination, initiative, the will to detach from the mass and follow their own way), fed and fattened with advertising and commodities, and trained to behave all in the same way, all destined to exploitation and, ultimately, consumption.

Premiering in Italy on December 10, 1967, in the town of Saint-Vincent[30] (so technically being a 1967 release), nevertheless *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* was by every means a 1968 movie, in style and content. As Questi later confessed, that strange, crazy little film had made a great impression on fellow filmmakers and scriptwriters, such as Alberto Lattuada and Ugo Pirro: its willingness to break patterns and dare new narrative and stylistic solutions helped Italian cinema move away from its somehow clichéd patterns. The critics were understandably puzzled, though: on the one hand, they praised the film's formal qualities, and on the other they were baffled by the resort to violence and the grotesque. Tullio Kezich, while praising its "macabre invention and stylistic clarity," failed to grasp the humor in the film, and called it "devoid of irony."[31] Whereas, according

to Alberto Moravia, "the two levels of the film, the political-conceptual and the realistic-visual one, almost never coincide.... The polemic against consumer society, which should have been the pivot of the story, becomes a mere pretext for the expression of a strong and rather genuine taste for cruelty, blood and death."[32]

*La morte ha fatto l'uovo* did rather good business in Italy; it grossed about 389 million *lire*, less than *Se sei vivo spara*, but it was sold well abroad. It gathered a cult status of sorts in the U.S. market, where it was released as *Death Laid an Egg*, or *Plucked*.[33]

As with *Se sei vivo spara*, the film had some trouble with the law: a couple of weeks after its official release, a scandalized viewer denounced it to the magistrate and asked for it to be seized, calling it "a horrifying spectacle, and degrading of the morals," thus obscene. The irate man was a certain Armando Cillario, a former competitor in Mike Bongiorno's immensely popular TV quiz "Lascia o raddoppia?," where he ran as an expert on Italian cinema. Cillario's judgment of Questi's film was trenchant: "This movie filled me with indignation, also as a movie connoisseur."[34] In early February the film was briefly seized by order of the Public Prosecutor in Florence "for the evidence in which sex and violence appear in almost every scene, and especially those in which the protagonist appears together with prostitutes."[35] Ironically, on the same day the magistrate issued a similar measure for another film, *Trans-Europ-Express*.

**U.S. poster for *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*, released overseas as *Plucked* (courtesy Nocturno Cinema).**

Over the years, *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* was trimmed for distribution purposes: originally running 109 minutes, it later circulated in prints running less than 90, and missing about 20 minutes of footage: for instance, the character of Luigi, played by Renato Romano, had been utterly removed from the film. The complete version has recently been restored for home video release.

## *Exploring Magic*

It took a few years before Questi returned behind the camera. After the debacle of *Più a fondo nelle foreste*, he and Arcalli wrote a script, *Happening*, also known as *L'azzurro*

*assassino*, which no one wanted to finance: "We carried it around left and right to no avail. They took us for madmen."[36] *Happening* was a movie about juvenile alienation, which Giulio wanted Kim to co-direct. It was structured into four episodes that fit in one another, set in four American cities; as Questi recalled, "It was a sort of follow-up to *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*.... It was a difficult script to write. Basically, it was a film where editing was of primary importance, it was the very text of the movie."[37]

His new film was first announced in the summer of 1970. Former Miss Italy Lucia Bosé, interviewed on the set of *Qualcosa striscia nel buio*, mentioned that her next work would be a movie called *Amanda*, directed by Giulio Questi, where she would play "a mysterious mother, a fortune teller and a sorceress."[38] Shooting would start the following summer, and by then the title had been changed to *Arcana*.

The film was produced by Gaspare Palumbo, who had worked with Alberto Cavallone (on *N come negrieri*) and Ermanno Olmi (on *E venne un uomo*, 1965, and *Un certo giorno*, 1968), and had also helped Augusto Tretti finish his second feature film *Il potere* (1971; see *Chapter 7*). *Arcana* was a low-budget picture, with Bosé being the most famous name involved. Once the star of such prestigious works as Michelangelo Antonioni's *Cronaca di un amore* (1950) and *La signora senza camelie* (1953), she had returned to acting by the end of the 1960s after over a decade away from the sets. Questi cast also a young actor with an interesting face named Maurizio Degli Esposti, who had only acted in a couple of films, *Uccidete il vitello grasso e arrostitelo* (1970, Salvatore Samperi) and *La ragazza di nome Giulio* (1970, Tonino Valerii), and the French-born Tina Aumont. Filming took place in Milan in June and July 1971, for the most part inside a real apartment.

This time Questi concocted the story by himself, as Arcalli was very busy. He had become one of Italian cinema's most requested editors, and worked for the likes of Zurlini, Liliana Cavani, Giuseppe Patroni Griffi (*Metti, una sera a cena*, 1969, *Addio fratello crudele*, 1971) Michelangelo Antonioni (*Zabriskie Point*, 1970, *Professione: reporter*, 1975), Bernardo Bertolucci (*Il conformista*, 1970, *Ultimo tango a Parigi*, 1972, and *Novecento*, 1976). In 1974, he was called by Sergio Leone to script his new movie, *C'era una volta in America*. Even though Giulio and Kim remained very good friends, their professional paths had diverged, and their amazing spiritual and creative bond of the mid-to-late 1960s had partly loosened.

*Arcana* is the surreal tale of a Southern widow, Mrs. Tarantino (Bosé), who earns her living as a modern-day witch in Milan, exploiting people's superstition, with the help of her son (Degli Esposti), to whom she is morbidly attached. They organize séances, and prepare magic filters and potions for the customers who knock at their door for help. Whereas the woman plays on people's superstition as a way to gain money, her son really believes in magic, and forces her to reveal its true secrets to him. He collects the ingredients to make a magic potion and uses it to put a spell on a young woman, Marisa, whom he then rapes. Marisa gets pregnant, and asks Mrs. Tarantino to perform an abortion on her, but she dies during the operation. Mrs. Tarantino's son escapes to the city, while a violent clash is taking place in the streets between the police and the subway workers. The woman follows him and is accidentally shot dead by a policeman.

The sight of a superstitious underbelly of post-war Italy, proliferating in the big

cities, had been depicted by the likes of De Sica (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948, in which the protagonist and his son pay visit to a seer in the desperate attempt to recover the man's stolen bike), and Fellini (the episode *Agenzia matrimoniale*, in *L'amore in città*, 1953), but never with such vividness. In an extraordinary sequence, the young man goes around the city, looking for ingredients for his magic potion, which he finds in the most unlikely of places, such as spontaneous herbs growing on the sidewalk. Magic is all around us, as someone would soon say in a much more famous Italian film. But never as in *Arcana* has magic been depicted as effectively as something blossoming out of ordinary life. In many ways, *Arcana* recalls another great and overlooked Italian film, Brunello Rondi's *Il demonio*. Both films got inspiration from the work of the noted ethnologist and anthropologist Ernesto De Martino, whose essays on popular cultured inspired other filmmakers as well: Gianfranco Mingozzi's episode *Le tarantate* in *Le italiane e l'amore* was also based on De Martino's studies.

The film had a strong political and social urgency. After the critique on consumerism of *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*, Questi reflected on the loss of cultural roots—a theme dear also to Pasolini, whose work, incidentally, Questi never really liked—and the immigration to Northern Italy, which brought to a bastardization of the archetypes of rural culture after the shocking impact with the big cities. *Arcana* paints an impressive portrait of the irrational roots beneath modern-day urban society, and depicts a world where such a culture, founded on magic and superstition, still lives behind the walls of the huge condominium complexes, hidden and repressed on the surface but ready to burst out. "I always loved a cinema that would break the crusts of reality," Questi claimed, and *Arcana* is the best expression of this concept.

The film opens with a puzzling warning to the audience: "This film is not a story. It's a game of cards. Therefore, neither its beginning nor its epilogue are credible. You are the players. Play smartly and you'll win." The opening sequence follows several people as they converge on the huge popular condo where Mrs. Tarantino lives; they look circumspect, diffident, almost ashamed, as if to conceal their secret, their irrational core. They are restless souls who have only apparently integrated. The surface is set against the underground world: the galleries where the workers dig and dig endlessly, like zombies. The cards are on the table, the players are ready to play.

The idea of the subway as a hidden half was a theme common to other works of the period, namely the TV mini-series *Geminus* (1969) and *Il segno del comando* (1971), as well as Fellini's *Roma* (1972). But Questi employs the contraposition between two opposite realities in an ingenious way, and with thought-provoking results. First, there is the psychoanalytic angle. The subway workers are a symbol for the repressed, the forgotten which lurks beneath the surface. Degli Esposti's character lost his father, a subway worker, in an accident, and must come to terms with this loss, while also detaching himself from his mother's incestuous attentions. His wanderings in the underground are also a voyage into the subconscious, which results in a series of puzzling and sometimes horrific images, such as a severed arm or the sight of a subway train whose occupants look like dead souls (here, Questi predates the metaphysical metropolitan anguish of *Jacob's Ladder*, 1990).

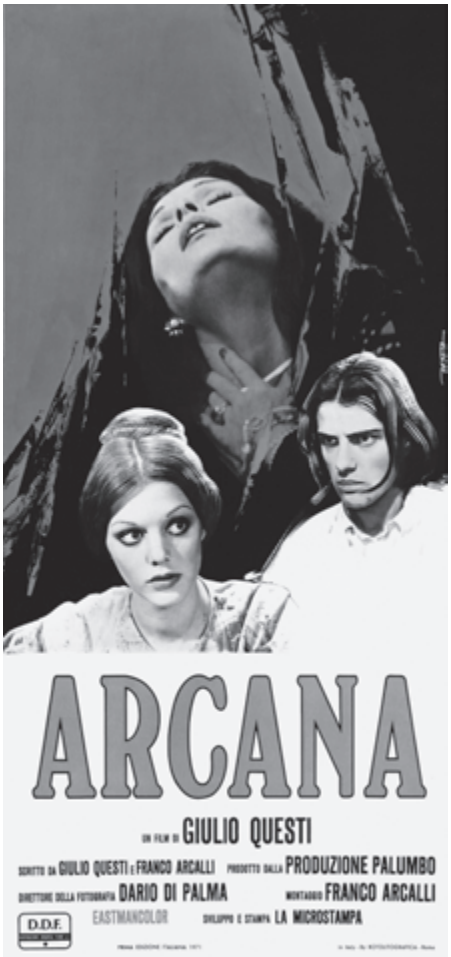
Then, there is the political metaphor. The young man's rebellion and rising awareness has the effect of starting an invisible war between opposite forces, and the revolt

of the obscure elements underneath. It is a "revolt of the oppressed" who at first barely put their head out to the surface (as in the opening scene where the subway workers emerge from a manhole) and then take the courage to turn against Power: the final riot in the streets hints at a proletarian revolution, and it is the closest Questi ever came to a political manifesto. which deflagrates in the liberating violence of revolution and its counterpart, violent repression—again, Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* comes to mind in the abrupt ending.

For the score, Questi hired a young composer named Romolo Grano, but he also managed to include a piece of music that he had personally recorded several years earlier, in 1965, while working on *Il mattino dei maghi*, a documentary to be directed by Gillo Pontecorvo and inspired by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier's 1960 occult-themed book *The Morning of the Magicians*. Pontecorvo left the project to finally start work on *La battaglia di Algeri* (1966), and asked Questi to replace him temporarily, and shoot some footage during his absence, to keep the project afloat. Giulio left to Agia Eleni, a small Greek village north of Thessaloniki, to film a religious rite, a walk on burning charcoals. He stayed there for three days, and more than the event itself, it was the atmosphere that struck him: "What I felt was the growing whisper of an authentic, deep, suffering popular religiousness, an intimate and mysterious rituality." A constant presence was the sound of a one-cord violin played by a villager, "penetrating and hypnotic," which accompanied the preparations for the ritual, "a strident, never-before-heard music, a motif which returned over and over, implacable, with a fast rhythm." *Il mattino dei maghi* eventually ended up in a drawer, and after *La battaglia di Algeri* Pontecorvo made *Queimada*. But Questi kept aside the tape with that eerie violin music for years, hoping to be able to use it someday. He built a whole sequence around it: it is the film's centerpiece, which depicts the eruption of magic and the link between the Southern countryside and the big city. A violinist walks along a dusty country road, a donkey is lifted atop a church with ropes, while in Mrs. Tarantino's apartment a magic rite is performed, with astounding effects: at the climax, live frogs emerge from Mrs. Tarantino's mouth. Bosé's commitment for the scene was nothing short of amazing: the actress put several small live frogs in her mouth, which she would then vomit on camera, all done live and without special effects. It is the very best sequence in Questi's cinema, and one of the most amazing *fantastique* scenes ever put on film.

However, the director claimed that he was not fully satisfied with *Arcana*. "Here and there it is rather monotonous. Today I'd invent much more, because I was so fixated with the sequences that I thought were magical, that I only wanted to shoot those, and I kind of neglected the rest. I loved the sequences of the men at work in the subway, the workers, the underground train at standstill in the gallery, the commuters looking like ghosts … those were my sequences, the rest seemed routine to me." Reviewers seemed to share his view: most praised the original and powerful depiction of esoteric and magical themes, but criticized its desultoriness, and labeled the ending as weak and somewhat unresolved. Bosé's acting was generally praised as well, and she won a prize as best actress at the XV "Mostra del film d'autore" (*Auteur* film exhibition) in Sanremo.[39] But commercially *Arcana* was a disaster. The distributor, D.D.E., went bankrupt while the copies of the film were being printed. Only five were distributed all over the nation. It didn't even play in many big cities.

## *In Exile*




**Italian poster for *Arcana* (1972) (art by Enrico De Seta).**

While filming *Arcana* Questi had other projects in stove. None of them materialized. Philippe Leroy announced that he would star in his next film, set in Columbia (perhaps again *La rivoluzione*, a.k.a. *Più a fondo nelle foreste*?),[40] but it all came to nothing. Another unfilmed project he and Arcalli concocted was *Bella ciao*, the story of a partisan woman (hence the title, which refers to a popular Partisan song originated during the civil war). Eventually, one of their scripts seemed on the verge of finally becoming a movie: it was a grim on-the-road yarn called *Fichi d'india*, the story of three Southern teens—two boys and a girl—who moved to the North with their families at an early age, and who decide to travel to their hometown in Southern Italy, which they have never seen. The trip results in a series of awful, tragic and grotesque misadventures, and at the end of the journey only one of the protagonists will be alive. Producer Galliano Juso liked the screenplay, and got in touch with Carlo Ponti's company Champion. To Questi, who in the meantime was making ends meet by shooting TV ads, it seemed the chance to finally hit the big time, under the wing of such an important film tycoon.

Soon, however, disagreements began. Giulio wanted to make a film with young and unknown actors, while Ponti wanted to impose his protégée Dalila Di Lazzaro. Moreover, one year passed in useless discussions, with Ponti insisting that Giulio and Kim change the script, and discard a part which he found too daring. One of the boys drowns in an oil mill; his friends recover the body and take him with them, in their car; then they come across a prostitute, and pay her to perform oral sex on the dead man. To Questi, the scene meant "a stubborn rebellion against the commonplaces tied to the notion of death, which I did not want to lose." His refusal of a compromise led to defeat: after the umpteenth stormy meeting, Ponti kicked him off the project. The movie (retitled *L'Italia s'è rotta*) was eventually directed by Steno in 1976, starring Di Lazzaro, Teo Teocoli and Enrico Montesano. Questi was credited as the co-author of the story, and he and Arcalli were listed as co-authors of the title song with Enzo Jannacci, but the script had been rewritten from scratch by the director with Sergio Donati and Luciano Vincenzoni. Giulio never even saw the movie.

The disappointing experience of *Fichi d'India* was the straw that broke the camel's back. Giulio and Marilú moved to the island of Baru, in Colombia, where she had purchased

a hectare of land and built a small cottage, with no electricity or running water. It was Giulio's shelter, the cure from the delusions of filmmaking. He would divide his time between Italy and South America, where he had some illustrious friends, such as novelist Gabriel García Márquez and actor Kabir Bedi. But running away from Italy was also the sign of a deeper political disillusionment, in a period when Italy was stained red with terrorism and political killings. Even though it didn't belong to Giulio, the title *L'Italia s'è rotta* (Italy Has Broken Up) perfectly fit his feelings toward his home country at that time.

Back and forth from his private exile in Baru, Questi worked on more film projects, but with no luck. One was an adaptation of Alberto Moravia's novel *L'attenzione*, to be produced by Alberto Senatore, the man who had financed Petri's *Indagine su un cittadino al di sopra di ogni sospetto*. But despite the latter's big plans, such as having Richard Burton in the lead, it soon turned out that Senatore simply didn't have the money to put the film together. Another idea, a throwback to Questi's early days, was a two-part documentary on the Indios of the rainforest. Then there was *Sierra Nevada*, a story about cocaine smuggling set between the titular mountain in Venezuela and New York. Senatore was enthusiastic about that, and once again Questi decided to trust him. The director and the producer flew to New York circa 1976 and set up an office, and while Senatore scouted for financing, Giulio lived the nightlife in the city of a thousand lights. And, thanks to Daniele's friendship with Carlo Ponti's son, he even took a small revenge on the tycoon: he got the keys of Ponti's apartment near Central Park, and during his stay he slept in the producer's own bed. At a certain point a Hollywood producer seemed to be interested in *Sierra Nevada*, and the two men moved to Los Angeles. Months passed, but the project did not advance.

For the best part of 1976, Questi went back and forth between Rome and Colombia, trying to carry along his documentary project as well, through financing on the part of Italian television, but to no avail. Meanwhile Senatore stayed in L.A., trying to cut a deal which day by day seemed on the verge of materializing, only to be postponed, over and over again. Then came 1977: not a happy year for Giulio, who found out he had an arterial disease of the lower limbs that demanded a difficult surgical intervention. His friend Kim Arcalli was not well either: he had intestine cancer. Both men spent together the weeks preceding surgery, and met again during convalescence. Giulio was with Kim on the day before he died, of heart failure, on February 24, 1978.

## *Television Man*

By the end of the Seventies, *Sierra Nevada* was a dead horse. Short of money, Questi agreed to adapt Jean Courtois-Brieux's apocalyptic novel *La guerre des insectes* into a script for a French TV mini-series: directed by Peter Kassovitz and starring Mathieu Carrière, it was broadcast in 1981. Giulio wrote the script in Colombia and sent the drafts by mail to Paris; he didn't even watch the finished film. Then, tired of flying to the States in the hope of mounting a movie that inside him he knew would never be made, he abandoned every hope of directing *Sierra Nevada* and settled in Rome, to earn himself some much-needed cash. Television was the fastest way.

Giulio shot some TV ads, wrote a script for an adaptation of Luigi Natoli's serial novel *I beati Paoli*, which eventually was shelved, and directed a couple of Gothic stories for the small screen: *L'uomo della sabbia* and *Vampirismus*, both based on E.T.A. Hoffmann's short stories. As he recalled, "those were different times compared with now, and there were quite good people working in television. There was a list of stories chosen by Italo Calvino—hence we started at a level that today we could only dream of—it is not that RAI officials came up with the scripts, as now happens. So, I was commissioned two TV movies, to be chosen from those on the list: I picked up Hoffmann and made my two films, at a distance of a couple of years."[41]

Regrettably, the complex themes of Hoffmann's tale were partially lost in Questi's adaptation of *L'uomo della sabbia*. The director managed to squeeze in some nice visual inventions, such as the scene where the protagonist Nataniele (Donato Placido) and his friend Lotario (Saverio Vallone) discuss philosophy as they fence, which pays homage to a famous sequence of Buñuel's *La Voie lactée* (1969), but overall the result failed to convey the uncanny core of the story, in which Hoffmann discovered the subconscious one hundred years ahead of psychoanalysis, thus inspiring Sigmund Freud's celebrated essay *Das Unheimliche*. By having Nataniele evoke his childhood nightmares (he is obsessed with the disquieting "sandman," who gouges out children's eyes, and he identifies the monster with the ambiguous attorney Coppelius, whom he believes to be involved in his father's death), Hoffmann staged a fear of mutilation that alluded to castration, as later theorized by Freud. But Questi opted not to include the first encounter between little Nataniele and Coppelius; therefore, the drama of the adult Nataniele (who thinks he recognizes Coppelius as the optician Coppola) fails to reach the poignancy it had on paper. The director was more interested in the other uncanny element of the story: Olimpia (Francesca Muzio), the beautiful girl Nataniele falls for, unaware that she is in fact an automaton. In the scene where the mechanical doll debuts in society, Questi partially recovered the biting anti-bourgeois vein of *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*.

Even though shot on a shoestring and on tape, entirely in the studio, *Vampirismus* was the best effort of the two. Despite the title, it was not a vampire story in the strictest sense. Count Ippolito (Antonio Salines) welcomes as guests in his house an elderly woman with a shady past, who calls herself the Baroness (Mariagrazia Marescalchi), and her little more than teenage daughter Aurelia (future film director Francesca Archibugi); attracted by the young woman, the Count marries her, only to find that at night his bride wanders in the graveyards, digging up and devouring corpses.

Questi's film departs from the aristocratic model of the vampire. Ippolito is a refined gentleman, distant from the things of the world ("You know that my greatest aspiration is being a serene and imperturbable dandy, which seems to me the only possible form of stoicism in this age of overwhelming democracy," he says), whereas the self-appointed "Baroness" is a social climber who settles in his house—in an ironic paraphrase of the rule that a vampire must be invited in by its victim—like a parasite, binging with tea and pastries, and is frowned upon by the circle of aristocrats that Ippolito is part of.

Hoffmann's story foreshadowed a reflection on the crisis of aristocracy, and its corpse-feeding ghoul demolished "an Illuministic, rational conception of man and

human body."[42] Questi's adaptation pairs an embryonic class struggle with the battle of the sexes, and is rather daring for a TV movie in its depiction of sexuality. Aurelia's is a mental pathology, a neurosis caused by sexual traumas, and her night raids are a visceral answer to her diurnal existence as a remissive bride. *Vampirismus* even included female nudity, which the director was requested to drastically tone down: "To show a full-frontal nude on TV was not so natural in those days. The functionaries got scared, and told me I had to cut it. I was cornered, and I trimmed quite a lot, but some of the nudity stayed, and it was not offensive, it looked like a Cranach painting, wonderful!" Questi gave the film a morbid, voyeuristic feel, and even included a reference to his beloved Bataille, mixed with his own *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*, in the scene where Aurelia spies his mother's encounter with a lover, who has her sit naked on an egg.

The theatrical dimension, even claustrophobic, made necessary by the low budget, is an unexpected asset. The story takes place entirely in Ippolito's palace, and the only connection with the outside world is a large window in the living room that gives on a garden-cemetery where the key events take place: the funeral of the Baroness, the wedding, the discovery of the bride's nocturnal activities. This choice helped the director depict an enclosed, putrefying world.

Other made-for-TV works followed. A documentary on the legendary Lucio Battisti, possibly Italy's greatest and most influential pop singer and composer, led Questi to meet journalist David Grieco. The two men struck up a friendship and started writing together. The result was an idea for a TV series about a judge named Oscar Moreno whose life falls into pieces after he is expelled from the judiciary because he broke a bottle on a lying defendant's head; his wife leaves him, he goes to live in a boat anchored on the river Tiber, and starts a new life as a detective. The series, *Il giudice*, starred Jean-Luc Bideau, Mimsy Farmer and Claudio Cassinelli, and took form as a cultured homage to the genre, with a protagonist that recalled, not only physically, Elliot Gould in Robert Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973). But the character of Oscar Moreno had also something of Questi, from the love of literature and psychoanalysis (the judge reads Jacques Lacan's books) to his metaphorical rebirth and the refusal of the rules of society, underlined by his choice of living in a boat instead of a real house.

The five episodes, each 50 minutes long, were shot in the summer of 1984[43] and broadcast two years later to mixed reviews; despite news of a second season being in the works, *Il giudice* did not have a sequel.[44] But Questi and Grieco formed a dynamic duo, and wrote several more scripts together, some of them (such as the intriguingly titled *Madre paura*, the story of a deranged woman who kidnaps a little girl from a couple of tourists, and *Terapia del delitto*) destined to remain on paper. That wasn't the case with *Non aprire all'uomo nero*, made in 1990 for RAI, a psychoanalytical thriller starring Aurore Clément and Giuliano Gemma and with music by Pino Donaggio, about a psychoanalyst, Lori (Clément) who is shocked to learn that a young female patient, Francesca (Claudia Muzii), has allegedly committed suicide. However, she finds out that the girl was probably killed by her mysterious lover, and from the confessions Francesca made during the psychoanalytic sessions, she becomes convinced that the murderer is a certain Aldo Moreno, who had also been the lover of Francesca's mother, a deceased actress. She investigates with the help of her lover, a barrister named Andrea (Gemma), but she will find out a shocking truth. *Non aprite all'uomo nero* is very close

to *gialli*, with a mystery rooted in the past and its reliance on a protagonist whose ordinary world collapses as soon as she starts unfolding it. The stylized dream scenes, which depict Lori's obsession with the murder, show that Questi had not lost his touch, and some sequences—such as Lori's discovery of a dead body hidden in a wardrobe in her own house—fully embrace the genre's dynamics. But Grieco's script is too talky and with an overreliance on psychoanalytic motifs (including Lori's relationship with her little son, and the latter's dislike for Andrea), and as a consequence the detection never becomes gripping as it should be. The twist ending packs a punch, and is surprisingly grim, if not wholly unexpected, but Questi admitted that he never liked it.

By the end of the 1980s, Giulio Questi had underwent the same transition as many of his colleagues, from the big to the small screen. It was a necessary step, since Italian cinema was looking more and more like a dry river, and filmmakers were like fish swimming in small, less and less oxygenated pools of water. In the summer of 1989, newspapers reported that a new version of *Il segno del comando* would begin shooting in May 1990, starring Robert Powell, Elena Sofia Ricci, Michel Bouquet, Paolo Bonacelli and Sonia Petrovna, and with Questi directing.[45] The mini-series was part of a six-project package concocted by producer Arturo La Pegna,[46] and would be co-produced by Silvio Berlusconi's company Reteitalia.

The original *Il segno del comando* was a five-part mini-series, directed by Daniele D'Anza and starring Ugo Pagliai as a Byron scholar who arrives in Rome and finds himself entangled in a mystery with supernatural undertones, which involves a mysterious woman (Carla Gravina) who may or may not be a ghost, and a "sign of command," an amulet which ensures eternal life. With its atmospheric mixture of mystery, Gothic and romance, it was a smash hit when first broadcast in May 1971, with almost 15 million viewers.[47] The new version, scripted by Grieco, was set in Paris, and the storyline was very different from the model. Questi didn't care much about the project, although the story would have suited his eye for the bizarre and his interest in the occult, but he soldiered on professionally; moreover, the crew was first rate, including the prestigious d.o.p. Edmond Richard, editor Franco Fraticelli and composer Luis Bacalov.

It took two more years for *Il segno del comando* to reach the small screen, on August 19, 1992. Unfortunately, what viewers could see was not the film its author had in mind. Originally devised as a two-part, 212-minute long mini-series, it was broadcast in a severely cut version which ran only 90 minutes. "It was a dignified work," the director complained, "with a certain sumptuousness. I say "it was" because I'm talking about something that no longer exists. Now it has become a monotonous, silly, boring thing."[48] Questi did not withdraw his signature ("I hate *auteurs*' whinings," he explained), and faced the critical massacre. As a reviewer pointed out, "One of the mystery's characteristics is that the inexplicable reigns supreme. Here the occult, ghosts, reincarnations, spiritism are pawns moved by an improvident and laughable secret sect that aims to push the professor to find the medallion of immortality (which will then turn out to be one of those phosphorescent necklaces that are sold on the beach). Not coincidence, but clumsy premeditation is the chessboard on which the protagonists move among a waste of fluttering souls and cross-dissolves."[49]

Another work-for-hire project followed: the second season of the TV crime series *L'ispettore Sarti*, starring Gianni Cavina and based on novelist Loriano Macchiavelli's

stories. Questi was chosen to direct five of the six episodes because his name was rather popular in Germany due to his old movies, especially *Se sei vivo spara*. Too bad the scripts were poles apart from his style and taste: rather than giving up, he rewrote most of them, uncredited, as he went on. Filming took place at breakneck speed, with the five 90-minute-long films completed in 100 days' work, but Giulio managed to make some visual experiments, by employing the Steadicam in an interesting, unusual manner. This time, no one interfered in the editing, and he supervised the final product personally. But directing was no longer his primary passion.

## *Made by Giulio*

During the 1980s Giulio began to write short stories, drawing from those memories of war that he never attempted to turn into a film. "Having always considered cinema as a fiction which takes the form of an autonomous and definitive reality, I never wanted to nail in this fiction my intimate memory of that experience.... I feel that cinema would destroy it in a pseudo-reality." Literature would allow him to finally face the ghosts of the past before they vanished into nothing. The result was the short story collection *14 racconti*, printed privately in just a dozen copies, and given to his closer friends. To him, it was an autobiography, and a legacy. At 70, he thought he was done with filmmaking, especially since, after *L'ispettore Sarti*, a script written with Berto Pelosso for producer Leo Pescarolo and titled *All'inferno coi soldi!* failed to become a movie. Giulio broke up with Pescarolo and eventually decided to turn his grim story about loan sharks into a novel, *Effetti e scadenze*. Once again literature had become a safety net.

With the third millennium, as a septuagenarian with a full life behind him, Giulio Questi thought of himself as a writer, inhabiting a solitary world which no longer demanded time-wasting interactions with producers, distributors, ministerial committees. All he needed was a personal computer and his own brain. Then, one day in January 2002, something happened which made him return to filmmaking, albeit in a surprising and nonconformist way. "I went to the dentist. In a whole afternoon, I underwent the extraction of 12 teeth, the last ones I had. Some just did not want to come out. It was necessary to intervene with drills, percussion chisels, levers, tongs. After coming out from that torture cabinet, inebriated with novocaine, I walked past a shop window, behind which a Canon camera was on display. My mouth was full of blood, my eyes were filled with tears. I felt the desperate need of a consolatory compensation, of something to love. I went in the shop and bought the Canon MVXli for the price of 2,000 euro."

And so began Giulio Questi's new life as a filmmaker. He had been a documentarist, then a jack of all trades, finally a promising director of bizarre feature films; he had waded through crisis and aborted projects, he had landed in television, and now ... now it was the time for do-it-yourself filmmaking, 100 percent independent. Giulio began making short films at home, on his own. He was the scriptwriter, the director, the editor, the only actor. Most importantly, he was his own boss. This is how his first video, *Doctor Schizo and Mister Phrenic*, was born.

In the next five years, seven more short films followed, produced home-made by

the significantly named Solipso Film—that is, Questi himself, most of the times the one and only person behind and before the camera. They were small miracles of inventiveness, as bizarre as funny, despite the limited (to use a euphemism…) means. The stories were minimal yet biting, like the surreal and deadly confrontation between a man and his double in *Doctor Schizo and Mister Phrenic* (which at times looks like a Dario Argento parody, with its POV black-gloved killer shots inside Questi's small apartment), the *film noir*-style *Lettera da Salamanca* (again with Questi himself and once more in a dual role, as himself and as a masked stranger who delivers a mysterious letter) or the soliloquy of a man writing his diary at candlelight during a blackout in *Mysterium noctis*. Others encompassed more characters, such as the mordant love triangle *Tatatatango*, and *Repressione in città*.

Once again Questi managed to explore thought-provoking themes in an original way, like *Vacanze con Alice* (on pedophilia) and *Repressione in città* (a zero-budget dystopian tale possibly inspired by *Brazil*). But the most poignant works of the lot dealt with Giulio's own past, like *Lola* (which evoked the memories of 1960s Paris and the Crazy Horse) and especially *Visitors*, which finally confronted the ghosts of civil war, with whom Giulio had shared all of his adult life. Here they are reimagined as restless souls, who cannot disappear until the last one who met them is still alive: a poetic way to meditate on the loss of our own historical memory, from the point of view of one of the last survivors of a vital period in the history of Italy.

The short films were released on DVD in 2009, under the title *By Giulio Questi*. The director liked to call them "cinematic tales in the first person when the "I-narrator" is disguised as a "I-narrated."" At over 80, Questi had become a cult filmmaker for the younger generations of cinephiles, who had discovered an *auteur* whose films were like

**Giulio Questi in the early 2000s (courtesy Nocturno Cinema).**

no other—as they had never been. It was the harbinger for Giulio's official debut as a narrator: in 2014, the prestigious company Einaudi published the short stories collection *Uomini and comandanti*, inspired by the grim events between the winter 1944 and the following spring. The book was awarded the prestigious Premio Chiara prize. Questi followed it with his memoir *Se non ricordo male* (literally, "If memory serves me well"), released in November 2014. The latter ended as follows: "Rereading these pages from the beginning, only now I realize that the people mentioned are almost all dead. It seems like a report from a mass grave. I'd better hurry, because I feel the ground collapsing under my feet."

Giulio Questi died in his sleep less than a month later, on December 3, 2014, at the venerable age of 90.

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## Giulio Questi—Essential Filmography

1962 *Le italiane e l'amore* (Co-D, SC); *Universo di notte* (Co-D)
1963 *Nudi per vivere* (Co-D, SC)
1964 *Amori pericolosi* (Co-D, SC)
1965 *La donna del lago* (SC)
1967 *Se sei vivo spara* (D, S, SC); *La morte ha fatto l'uovo* (D, S, SC)
1972 *Arcana* (D, S, SC)
1981 *L'uomo della sabbia* (TV Movie) (D, SC); *La guerre des insectes* (SC)
1982 *Vampirismus* (TVMovie) (D, SC)
1986 *Quando arriva il giudice* (TV mini-series) (D, S, SC)
1990 *Non aprire all'uomo nero* (TV movie) (D, S, SC)
1992 *Il segno del comando* (TV mini-series) (D, SC)
1994 *L'ispettore Sarti—Un poliziotto, una città* (D)

# 5

# Brunello Rondi—The Poet of Obsession

In 1958, the illustrious Cesare Zavattini wrote words of praise about a young intellectual who also dabbled in scriptwriting: "He is both humble and presumptuous, just like his thoughts…; I see him as one of those who know better the times we're living in. He is so eager to live in these times that he's almost moving." Zavattini hoped that the young scriptwriter would soon make his feature debut as a director, and describe those times "with the same strength and poetry that one would use to describe his first love."[1] Fifteen years later, a critic, mercilessly panning the helmer's "latest erotic potboiler" *Tecnica di un amore*, stated that "the helmer's expressive deficiency is such that, even though here and there a few tormented intentions come to the surface, everything gets lost in confused banality, coarse clichés and indigestible amounts of nudity and sexual intercourses."[2]

Whatever had happened to Brunello Rondi?

## *A Renaissance Man*

Born on November 26, 1924, in Tirano, Lombardy, Brunello Rondi was—as his elder brother Gian Luigi, one of Italy's most noted film critics, used to say—a Renaissance man. He was a poet, a philosopher, a musicologist, a film critic and a well-respected playwright, widely regarded as a talented, eclectic intellectual—and an extremely prolific one as well, as shown by his conspicuous bibliography.

Rondi the musicologist ranged over classical and contemporary music alike: he wrote several books, including the first Italian monography on Béla Bartók and a volume on electronic composers, and countless articles and essays. Rondi the philosopher published four books between 1953 and 1960. Rondi the film critic and historian, in addition to being a regular contributor to many film magazines, wrote two tomes on Neorealism—*Il neorealismo italiano*, 1956, with a foreword by Roberto Rossellini, followed in 1957 by *Cinema e realtà* (Cinema and reality, prefaced by Federico Fellini)—which he considered as "the open quest for a new harmony among men and with nature,"[3] and a monography, *Il cinema di Fellini* (1965). He was an esteemed poet too, and his works were included in prestigious literary journals, such as *Officina* and *Botteghe Oscure*. He

published his first collection, *La città dei sassi*, in 1945. Twelve years later another collection followed, *La giovane Italia*, well-received by the literary world, and in 1958 his book of poetry *Amore fedele* was awarded the Firenze prize, by a jury headed by the noted poet Mario Luzi.[4]

Over the years, Rondi also established himself as a promising playwright. He had already written a radio drama in verses, *Sulle strade* (1948), for the London Olympics, and in 1959 he won the Catholic prize "Pro civitate christiana" in Assisi with his first stage play *L'assedio*,[5] brought to the stage by Enrico Maria Salerno and acclaimed by the public. Set in the Middle Ages, during feudalism, the play displayed the author's Catholic roots, an important part of his following work; it centered around the interpretation of Christianity, juxtaposing a feudal lord, his serfs, and a young canonic, Alcari, who vainly attempts to spread Christ's message of love and forgiveness.[6] Rondi and Salerno would later team up again for the play *Il capitano d'industria* (1961), with Salerno directing and Giancarlo Sbragia and Ivo Garrani as the protagonists.[7]

All these paths suggest a turbulent, incessant creative urge, which manifested itself in several directions at once; and they are often intertwined with those of Brunello Rondi the scriptwriter and the film director. His first steps in the movie industry date to the late 1940s, when he co-wrote the war drama *Ultimo amore* (1947, Luigi Chiarini) starring Clara Calamai and Andrea Checchi. Then he worked with Roberto Rossellini on *Francesco giullare di Dio* (1950), as scriptwriter (a credit he shared with Rossellini and four others) and assistant director: shot with a non-professional cast, most of them real Franciscan friars, including the protagonist, Nazario Gerardi, this brilliant take on the life of Saint Francis of Assisi was the first of three films on which Rossellini and Rondi worked together, the others being the outstanding *Europa '51* (1952), starring Ingrid Bergman, and the war drama *Era notte a Roma* (1960).

Among the scriptwriters for *Francesco giullare di Dio* there was also Federico Fellini, with whom Rondi was to begin a fruitful and lasting working relationship and a close personal friendship. Starting with *La strada* (1954), he was credited as "artistic advisor," a credit he maintained also on *Il bidone* (1955), *Le notti di Cabiria* (1957, on which in fact he also collaborated to the script), *La dolce vita* (1960) and *8½* (1963). Rondi also co-scripted *La dolce vita*, together with Ennio Flaiano and Tullio Pinelli. According to Fellini himself, several of the film's most brilliant sequences must be credited to "Brunellone" (as Federico used to call his tall friend): the decadent party in the house of a Roman prince, the "miracle" scene, the final orgy and its bitter aftermath on the beach at dawn. For his part, Rondi claimed that he and Fellini wrote almost all the dialogue together.

Brunello co-wrote Fellini's following projects as well for the best part of two decades, namely the episode *Le tentazioni del dottor Antonio* in *Boccaccio 70* (1962), *8½* (Fellini stated that Rondi enthusiastically embraced the project when it was only a just vague idea, whereas Pinelli and Flaiano were quite perplexed[8]), *Giulietta degli spiriti* (1965), the sadly never made *Il viaggio di G. Mastorna* (1965–67), *Fellini–Satyricon* (1969, on which his creative differences with Fellini led to him being credited as "collaborator to the screenplay"[9]), *Prova d'orchestra* (1979) and *La città delle donne* (1980), his last official collaboration with the Rimini-born director. Brunello Rondi's contribution to Fellini's work has often been underestimated, but his philosophical roots, the

interest toward the occult, and of course the erotic obsessions, were a vital element in the creation of Fellini's own universe, although Rondi never considered himself a co-author. Still, he used to attend to the shooting on the set, and would often come up with new ideas and bits of dialogue to follow Fellini's tendency toward improvisation. He was like a dialectical pole for the Maestro.

Rondi's love for cinema was absolute and turbulent, as shown by an episode which involved him in 1952, when the viscerally anti–Fascist Brunello faced a group of violent Fascist protesters who interrupted the screening of Carlo Lizzani's film on the partisan war, *Achtung! Banditi!* (1958). In the ensuing brawl, he was severely beaten.[10] During the 1950s he collaborated with other prestigious filmmakers, such as Alessandro Blasetti (on the comic anthology *Altri tempi*, 1952), taught acting at Rome's Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, and penned some scripts with Massimo Mida Puccini (a noted film critic and scriptwriter, who co-wrote *Europa '51* and *Achtung! Banditi!*, among others), namely *L'arrivista*, *Minorenni emancipati* and *La fabbrica*, all of them unfilmed. He even directed a handful of short documentaries: *Impiegati* and *Operai—"Ama il prossimo tuo come te stesso"* (both 1952) were heavily influenced by Zavattini's theory of Neorealism as "stalking of reality." *Impiegati*, written with his brother Gian Luigi and produced by Istituto Luce, followed the employees at Rome's Ministry of the Treasury during the course of one day. Similarly, *Operai* synthesized in less than ten minutes the hard-working day in the yard of the men who were building the Olympic Stadium in Rome. *Incontro nel bosco* (1956, also produced by the Istituto Luce) had a blatant moral and didactic tone: a group of kids enter a park and play war, destroying branches of fruit trees in the process. The gardener stops one of the boys and explains the damage he has done to the trees. Through his words, the child discovers nature, which he had previously not even considered.

The times seemed ripe for Rondi's feature debut as a director. In 1955, he had attempted to bring to the screen *Il paese Europa*, written with Tullio Pinelli and Paolo Di Valmarana. The film, to be produced by Carlo Ponti and Dino De Laurentiis, was the story of a Swedish girl who is working on her university thesis on the ethics of altruism and decides to take a trip all over Europe to study people's behavior in various European countries. Eventually she returns to her country with lots of material and enriched with an invaluable life experience, but her thesis is paradoxically rejected for lack of any scientific value. The film's thesis was the true nature of Europe is not the stereotypical one described by tourist guides, but the more spontaneous, and even contradictory one, which can be discovered in the different nations only through first-hand experience, but with the common denominator of the love for peace and friendship.

The project of a semi-documentary travelogue divided into five episodes set in as many countries (France, Spain, Germany, Russia and Italy) was a bit in the vein of Zavattini's ideas on Neorealism. For instance, the makers' intention was to depict a local usage of the Po valley, where women go to cemeteries on All Souls' Day to celebrate the dead by singing popular songs. *Il paese Europa* also partly anticipated the sensationalist documentaries of the following years, such as Blasetti's *Europa di notte* (1958) and its many rip-offs. But it never took off. Only a thin, 9-page treatment was submitted to the board of censors for preventive approval, and it was not met too favorably. The film would also include a trip to Communist Russia, a very scabrous topic at the time, so much so that the producers

specifically explained that the Russian sequence would be totally devoid of political reference, let alone showing "people in uniform." At that time, the head of the board of censors was undersecretary Oscar Luigi Scalfaro (who would become the President of the Italian Republic from 1992 to 1999. A devoted Catholic, Scalfaro was a severe censor of the public morality, and during his stint he rejected many projects for political reasons as well. *Il paese Europa* was most likely a victim of Scalfaro's attitude, namely with the prohibition to film in Russia. Another factor was probably Carlo Ponti's formal protest in 1955 against the undersecretary (who was planning to introduce a number of restrictions not unlike the Hays Code), which possibly led to a retaliation on Scalfaro's part.

It was only in the early 1960s that Brunello Rondi finally managed to get behind the camera. Producer Moris Ergas had bought the rights to Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1959 novel *Una vita violenta* (published abroad as *A Violent Life*) and called on Rondi to adapt it (with the help of several writers, including Franco Solinas and Franco Brusati) and direct the film. Ergas had the debuting director sided by a more experienced filmmaker, who would take care of the technical side of the shooting: co-director Paolo Heusch, an experienced assistant director since the early post–World War II years, who had already directed three features, all quite different from one another: the science-fiction film *La morte viene dallo spazio* (1958), the drama *Un uomo facile* (1959) and the horror flick *Lycanthropus* (a.k.a. *Werewolf in a Girls' Dormitory*, 1961, signed as "Richard Benson").

Shot in late 1961/early 1962,[11] *Una vita violenta* was passed by the censor board with a V.M.16 rating. The board demanded that a scene be cut in which the police charge the revolting inmates in a sanatorium with water hydrants, leading to some controversy[12]: the portrayal of armed forces in an unfavorable way caused many films to be more or less heavily cut in the post-war years, including Elio Petri's debut *L'assassino* (1961). Rondi and Heusch's film was moderately well received upon its release in late March 1962. Critics pointed out its formal qualities and impressive *mise-en-scène*, even though comparisons with Pasolini's *Accattone* (1961) were unfavorable.[13] Both films starred Franco Citti, a non-actor who would later become one of Italian cinema's most recognizable faces, and the plots were somewhat similar in following a young subproletarian's journey toward social conscience, which leads to his death. Citti's brother Sergio, who would become a director himself, giving Italian cinema several extraordinary, weirdly poetic films (including *Ostia*, 1970; *Storie scellerate*, 1973; *Casotto*, 1977) was the dialogue consultant, as he had been for the book; and Enrico Maria Salerno, who had supported Rondi's playwright career, showed up in a small role.

*Una vita violenta*'s best moments are to be found in its first half hour, which depicts the excesses of a bunch of young lower-class neo-Fascist delinquents. After breaking into a theater where Rossellini's *Il Generale Della Rovere* (another Moris Ergas production) is being projected—an episode which rang a bell with Rondi, given his own misadventure during the screening of *Achtung! Banditi!*—Tommaso (Citti) and his friends assault young couples, rob a gas store attendant, and rape a French girl. At dawn, adrenaline and rage give way to a deeply melancholic resignation. The rape scene was an addition to Pasolini's novel, and it is perhaps a hint at what Rondi would do next. "Are you going to communion, sweetheart?" one of the thugs addresses her sarcastically. The mixture of Catholicism and blasphemy will be a constant in many of his films.

As Rondi scholar Alberto Pezzotta observed,

> the French-speaking victim who is wearing a white veil … looks like a ghost, a Fellini-esque apparition, as the film abandons all existing models (the films of Franco Rossi and Mauro Bolognini with screenplays written by Pasolini) and goes beyond realism, to offer an intricately interwoven parable set in a least three different temporal dimensions: the memory dimension (the center of Rome taken over by thugs), the modern dimension (the futuristic building in front of which the rape takes place) and the dimension of the underprivileged Pasolini-esque characters who are excluded from progress.[14]

## *The Demon of Superstition*

If *Una vita violenta* was still a sort of test, 1963 saw Rondi's proper solo debut as a director, under the wing of Goffredo Lombardo's Titanus. The film marked also the first production experience of scriptwriter Luciano Martino, who would become one of the director's close friends.

The starting point for the project was a small poem that Rondi had written after a trip to the regions of Puglia and Lucania; other important sources of inspiration were the books of ethnologist Ernesto De Martino, particularly *Sud e magia* (1959), an extraordinary inquiry on the rites and culture of Lucania, and Luigi Di Gianni's *Magia Lucana* (1958), a documentary on the traditions of Lucania which employed recordings made by De Martino in 1954, during one of his journeys in the region.

Rondi conceived a story set in contemporary rural Southern Italy, about a young woman living in a remote mountain village whose sexual uninhibition has her fellow countrymen believe she's been possessed by the devil. Despite its title, *Il demonio* (The Devil; the working title was *Le indemoniate*, 'The Possessed'[15]) is absolutely not a horror movie, and the director was adamant that he didn't want to give any metaphysical implication to his film, but instead he wanted to analyze magic "as a concrete fact connected to an era, a usage, a cultural state."[16]

As Raymond Durgnat put it, the plot goes as follows: Purif—short for Purificazione, a name which in Italian means "purification"—"is beset by infernal voices, curses her lover when he marries another girl, is raped by a shepherd, exorcized by a priest (to no effect), and finally, seducing her lover, falls asleep in his arms, when, his wrath reborn, he carves a cross on her breast and murders her."[17] Rondi's aim was the portrayal of a "telluric" character, and the deep implications of the subconscious and irrational beliefs on an individual's personality. Such a character is Purificazione.

*Il demonio* starred a stunningly beautiful Israeli actress, Daliah Lavi, whose dark eyes and animal stare made an indelible impression. That same year, Lavi played the lead in Mario Bava's *La frusta e il corpo* (a.k.a. *Whip and the Body*), and later moved to Hollywood. The only other professional actor was Frank Wolff as Purif's object of desire, and ultimately her murderer, while the rest of the cast was formed by locals with no acting experience whatsoever.

Shot during the Second Vatican Council, in a period where the Church was slowly undergoing huge transformations, and released a few months after the death of Pope John XXIII, *Il demonio* offered a grim view of a country still plagued by superstition. Rondi drew liberally on the Italian literary tradition: Purif's character brings to mind Giovanni Verga's novel *La lupa* (brought to the screen by Alberto Lattuada in 1953 and

by Gabriele Lavia in 1996). The director claimed that he did not care for a study on madness à-la *The Snake Pit* (1948, Anatole Litvak); rather, Purif's relentless spiritual anxiety is closer to the sweet delirium that pervades the character of Johannes in *Ordet* (1955, Carl Theodor Dreyer). Rondi later pointed out that the possessed Purif was an anticipation of Italian cinema's most famous rebel, Lou Castel in *I pugni in tasca* (1965, Marco Bellocchio). Both display their rebellion through their body and irrational behavior (in Bellocchio's film the Castel character is an epileptic) which society vainly tries to stop and cut off, in Purif's case through a ritual exorcism. Purif's dark force is a primordial cry against the whole world, starting with her own family.

What Rondi cared for was also an in-depth study of Southern Italy's culture and traditions, as proven by the participation of Ernesto De Martino. Carlo Bellero's outstanding black-and-white scope cinematography brings vividly to the screen a barren land of windy high plains, small villages clinging on mountainsides and skeletal olive trees, yet Rondi was adamant in demanding of Bellero "a photography which would resolutely prune realistic atmosphere and the smallest hint of folklore, the light-and-shadow contrasts, the heat, the usually sleepy Southern climate or the abuse of whites,"[18] in order to create a "different" Southern Italy, far from the stereotypes seen in Italian cinema. Similarly, Piero Piccioni's electronic score, which avoids melody and usual film music trappings, hints at a deeper vibrating quality beyond everyday life.

The many semi-documentaristic scenes display the mixture of Christian and Pagan rites that the villagers perform, showing how Catholic religion has changed where it has been contaminated by local customs and beliefs. At a wedding, the wife's parents check if there are any knots or nodes outside the church's door, and the conjugal bed for the wedding night is covered with grapes and salt in a complex rite which should make the devil stay away. Later, a procession has the penitents walk in the main square carrying heavy rocks which symbolize their own sins, which they will then confess in front of all the other villagers. They exhibit images and icons of saints which look both grotesque and frightening.

**A French sales flyer for *Il demonio*, depicting Daliah Lavi in the infamous "hystero-epileptic arch" scene (courtesy Lucas Balbo).**

Superstition and faith have become interchangeable, and the exorcism performed in church by a priest is no different from other absurd Pagan rituals. In this incredible scene, Purif even performs a so-called "hystero-epileptic arch" which predates Linda Blair's infamous "spider walk" seen in the restored version of Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). The scene had been suggested by De Martino: the ethnologist had witnessed it being performed by the so-called "*tarantolate*," the women who undergo hysterical and convulsive crises, once believed to have been caused by the bite of tarantula spiders. If its actual influence on Friedkin's film is debatable, there are few doubts that *Il demonio* might have inspired Lucio Fulci's *Non si sevizia un paperino* (a.k.a. *Don't Torture a Duckling*, 1972): if Purif is a blueprint for Florinda Bolkan's "Maciara," the local witch doctor Zi' Giuseppe, who should cure the girl but abuses her instead, predates that of Georges Wilson in Fulci's film.

*Il demonio* had quite some trouble with the Board of Censors. In the first instance, on August 24, 1963, the committee rejected it as obscene. In detail, the committee denied the certificate for public screening because the film contained "scenes and sequences harmful to morality, such as those relating to the carnal violence on the part of the shepherd, the gropings and general behavior of the sorcerer, the carnal conjunction with Antonio, the protagonist's hysterical-sexual crisis in bed which continues even after the arrival of her father and its manifestations during the scene of the exorcism." The censorship visa (with a V.M.18 rating) was granted only after several cuts were performed. The censors also didn't like Rondi's quote of Brecht's *Life of Galileo* in the end, which was removed after the first public screenings. The ordeal was not a unique occurrence in the director's career: Rondi's following works would often have censorship troubles.

When *Il demonio* was screened at the 1963 Venice Film festival, most Italian critics destroyed it: Luciano Martino recalled meeting the director the morning after the screening, with Rondi desperately leafing through newspapers, incredulous that his film could provoke such ferocious criticism.[19] One reviewer even accused Rondi (himself a Catholic) to have made an anti–Catholic film, while the highly ideologized, left-wing *Cinema Nuovo* was so aggressive that the director wrote not one but two raging letters to the editor, Guido Aristarco. One dissenting voice was that of Edoardo Bruno, who, on the pages of the magazine *Filmcritica*, favorably compared Rondi's vision to Buñuel's, calling *Il demonio* one of Italy's first examples of cinematic Surrealism: "For the first time, the great Surrealist themes come to the fore in Italian cinema: mad love, violent tirades against the dullest aspects of society, the glossy close search of erotic elements in religion, both pagan and Catholic."[20]

Foreign critics, on the other hand, understood Rondi's approach to eroticism, described as a force of traumatizing power. In his book *Sexual Alienation in the Cinema*, Raymond Durgnat wrote:

> One can imagine how English or American horror specialists might have handled such a theme.... For Rondi, Purif's superstition is simply a climax form of the village's feudalism, and psychological explanations are eschewed (apart from the self-evident postulation that her particularly passionate temperament has been subjected to special stresses by the ethos indicated by her Christian name...). Episodes which might well have become melodramatic or Manichean denunciations of intolerance become more intricate transactions.... So ambivalent is human nature that a hostile society has every opportunity to turn the individual against himself, and make each deviant his own executioner.

> The story interweaves three fetish systems: (1) the village's mixture of superstition and prudent worldliness…; (2) the church's blend of exorcism (or witchcraft-cut-witchcraft), of erotic *bizarrerie* (the nuns as brides of Christ), and (3) Purif's internal conflicts of love and hate. Each system has its own insanity.[21]

This emphasis on eroticism, and the director's ability to portray tormented and suffering female characters, would mark Rondi's following output. "I've always been faithful—even in unpopular ways—to the issue of male and especially female neurosis," he later explained. "In my films, there are always female characters who communicate their neurosis through eroticism. I've often been interested in a destructive love exuberance, which furiously devastates whatever's around. Italian critics have often mistaken my attention to female eroticism for exploitation, whereas it was all about neurosis."[22]

*Il demonio* was distributed theatrically only in early 1964, to little commercial success. Meanwhile, Rondi's directorial career appeared to stall, even though he seemed to have plenty of new projects in mind. In November 1963 he announced that he was at work on his next film, *Il piacere* (The Pleasure), which later became *La passione* (The Passion), and that his "ideal protagonists" would be Monica Vitti and Peter O'Toole (or Albert Finney),[23] "the story of two lovers who seize themselves from reality and therefore fall into vice; their solitude corrupts them and leads them to an irremediable ruin."[24] What sounded like a promising erotic drama that would give the director an international notoriety was ultimately shelved, though. The same happened with *Il potere*, a modern-day adaptation of *Bel Ami*, in which Rondi purported to illustrate "the "method" to reach success in a society dominated by corruption and politicians."[25]

Another project that remained on paper was a loose adaptation of Ugo Moretti's play *Natale in casa d'appuntamento* (made into a film in 1976 by Armando Nannuzzi). It was initially announced with the title *Donna del sud*, then *La minorenne*: a country girl comes to Rome to work as a housemaid, but she gets pregnant, and to maintain her baby she leads a double life and becomes a prostitute. For the leading role, Rondi considered Stefania Sandrelli, who refused, then Gabriella Giorgelli, and eventually Sandra Milo. In an article published in *Paese Sera*, the director announced his purpose to describe "Rome seen as a squalid and cheerful circle of a hell without redemption nor transfigured visions."[26] Rondi drew from Fellini's *Le notti di Cabiria* (1957), on a path that would lead him to his 1973 film *Ingrid sulla strada*. The project seemed about to start in November 1964, but it came to nothing. On the other hand, little is known about two more unmade films he announced in the same article: *Il miliardario* (The Billionaire), "a satire with several dramatic complications … about an "illuminated" capitalist, full of ideals or what are believed to be such," produced by and starring Rossano Brazzi; and *Diario d'una tossicomane* (Diary of a Drug Addict), to be shot in the spring of 1965 in Carlo Ponti's villa on the Amalfi coast, which would "examine, with exceptional analytic obstinacy … the interiority of a female character seen in its less schematic aspects."

Despite his difficulties in mounting his new film as a director, Rondi was still enjoying a well-deserved popularity as Fellini's right-hand man. In April 1964, he was awarded (together with Fellini, Tullio Pinelli and Ennio Flaiano) the "Nastro D'Argento" (Silver Ribbon, the prestigious prize created by the union of Italian film journalists) for Best

Screenplay for *8½*. Fellini's masterpiece won also the Nastri d'Argento for Best Picture, Best Direction, Best Original Story, Best Cinematography and Best Music Score. It would not be its only triumph: a couple of weeks later *8½* won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. Rondi accompanied the director and Giulietta Masina to Los Angeles for the ceremony, together with Flaiano, Moris Ergas and Guido Alberti, the entrepreneur turned actor.[27] 1964 was a year to remember for personal reasons as well: in January his wife Ludovica had given birth to his son, Umberto.

In the meantime, Rondi had steadily continued his work as a playwright. In May 1965, his new play *Il viaggio*, starring Tino Carraro, Giuliana Lojodice and Lydia Alfonsi, had debuted in Florence, with Rondi himself as the director, and electronic music by Bruno Nicolai. He also considered a film adaptation of it, with Enrico Maria Salerno, Ingrid Thulin and Lisa Gastoni, which never got made.

## *The Pleasure in the Eyes*

Rondi returned behind the camera in July 1965. In an interview published in the daily newspaper *Paese Sera*, he discussed his third film as a director, *Più tardi Claire, più tardi…*, with a young interviewer named Dario Argento:

> I have no intention of making a mystery, or a horror film, or even a suspense yarn, Hitchcock-style. What really interests me is to grasp, with a film set in 1912, the origins of today's disease within the *bourgeoisie*, and to portray its degeneration with extreme violence. I have read very few crime novels in my life. And I must say that I don't even like them very much. In my film, there are indeed a crime, and an investigation. But they are just a pretext, in a story full of hatred set in the final years of the "Belle Époque," when some kind of false euphoria was decomposing, while one could glimpse the first signs of the impending war, the signs of hatred and the strengthening of class struggle.[28]

The film underwent many production problems. Originally it was to be an Italian-Spanish-French co-production, financed by Bianconero Film, a newly founded company which counted Tinto Brass among its associates, together with Madrid's Hispamer Films and the Parisian Prosagor Film. The estimated budget was 150 million *lire*.

Rondi had assembled a composite cast including Hollywood has-been Gary Merrill, German beauty Elga Andersen, French actors (Georges Rivière, Michel Lemoine and Janine Reynaud) and Spanish ones (Margarita Robles, José Villasante, José Riesgo), and respected Italian stage actresses such as Adriana Asti, Rossella Falk and Marina Malfatti. Art director (and future film director) Demofilo Fidani turned up in a brief role, and his wife Mila Vitelli took care of the costumes. The film received some press coverage in newspapers during filming, proving Rondi's popularity, but the shoot—which took place from July 1 to September 20, 1965, in fits and starts—was hampered by lack of money: accordingly, nobody in the crew was paid.[29]

Bianconero tried to take advantage of the new financial law on cinema, the so-called Corona law, which came into force in November 1965 and included a new discipline of co-production with substantial benefits for these types of films. Unfortunately, the ministry rejected Bianconero's request for bureaucratic reasons: the co-production query had not been submitted in the terms specified by the co-production agreements with the other two countries (that is, 30 days before the start of shooting), and Bianconero

(a new company with no other productions in its resume) did not have the requisites specified by the Corona law. The decision prompted the French Centre National de la Cinématographie to a similar unfavorable decision, and Prosagor backed out. The Italian company submitted a second co-production request, this time with Spain only, but never received an answer.

These vicissitudes severely hampered the movie's destiny, and resulted in Bianconero Film going bankrupt in March 1966. Rondi's film sank in a limbo: it remained unreleased for three years until the bankruptcy curator submitted it to the board of censors in June 1968. *Più tardi Claire, più tardi ...* received a visa, with an "all audiences allowed" rating, on June 26, 1968. It was finally picked up for distribution, but there are no traces of an Italian theatrical release. It soon disappeared without trace and surfaced on Italian TV only in 1980. Overseas it was released directly to television as *Run, Psycho, Run* via American International Television (AIP-TV) in 1969.[30]

Despite the director's assertions, the film features typical Gothic themes, namely the *doppelgänger* and mysterious past events which haunt the present, and the setting is a luxurious yet sinister and hostile-looking villa, whose haunting atmosphere is heightened by Carlo Bellero's sumptuous black-and-white cinematography. The plot revolves around a mysterious double murder: Claire (Andersen), the young wife of the elderly English judge George Dennison (Merrill), is brutally killed in her husband's villa in the Italian countryside, and her little son suffers a similar tragic fate. One year later Dennison returns to Italy with a new wife, Ann, who's a dead ringer for Claire, much to his family's disapproval. It turns out that the judge has hired the woman (Andersen again) to help him unmask the murderer: Ann's presence brings to the surface the greed and mutual hatred among Dennison's relatives and acquaintances, such as Lady Florence (Margarita Robles) and Dr. Boyd (Georges Rivière). The Hitchcockian influences are blatant, but several atmospheric sequences convey a remarkable Gothic mood; on the other hand, character development is closer to art films of the period than to genre ones, and the twist ending, which discloses Dennison himself as the murderer, is surprisingly grim and pessimistic.

Family as a vipers' nest would be a recurrent theme in the director's work; similarly, Rondi would often set his following films in a secluded space—a villa, an isle, an asylum, a prison—and set a single character, usually a woman, against a hostile environment or institution. If Purif was defeated by superstition, Ann is a victim of the "status quo," just as is Ruth (Adriana Asti), the disturbed "wild girl" who lives in the woods near the villa. Both are rejected by a self-sufficient microcosm based on hypocrisy and convenience, which Rondi is very good at depicting. There is an extraordinary sequence near the film's beginning where Claire's little child is playing the piano at a party, surrounded by an indifferent, bored audience: the guests are too busy tattling behind each other's backs to pay attention to the poor boy, who is having quite a hard time playing a difficult Bach piece. It's a moment that perfectly captures the film's theme, and shows how Rondi was not just an intelligent scriptwriter, but also quite a capable director.

With *Più tardi Claire, più tardi...*, Rondi moved further away from Neorealism, and developed the same idea of cinema that he had tried his hand at with *Il demonio*: an attempt at exploring the repressed in relation to society rules and usages, and characterized by a keen curiosity toward the irrational, the occult, the paranormal. Shot in

an exquisite black and white and featuring a refined score by Giovanni Fusco (with Severino Gazzelloni's soloist flute in evidence), *Più tardi Claire, più tardi ...* remains an impressive work, but the lack of editing credits (originally the editor was to be Mario Serandrei) and several awkward passages (including the sudden presence/absence of first-billed Merrill) give away its troubled production history. In fact, the finished film is not what the director had in mind. For one thing, Rondi's original ending was discarded. In fact, the twist ending was very different from the one in the finished film, and even the identity of Claire's murderer was different: the culprit was to be Dr. Boyd, Claire's lover, who did not stand her decision to leave him. The denouement was also much less pessimistic, with Ann and Dennison leaving together to start a new life.

Rondi had to change his script and make do with what he had. His intention was to focus on Dennison's disturbed psyche, and reshape the film into something different, as shown by a number of "additional scenes" written by the director himself—and probably not filmed in their entirety—included in the film's official script kept at the CSC library in Rome, which carries a list of alternate titles: *Il giudice* ("The Judge"), *La grande famiglia* ("The Big Family"), *I forestieri* ("The Strangers"), *Tutto quello che è chiaro o nascosto a casa del nobile Dennison* ("All that is either clear or concealed in the house of the noble Mr. Dennison") and, last and best, *Il piacere negli occhi* ("The Pleasure in the Eyes").

Possibly in order to make the film more commercial, and at the same time willing to push the story toward a more explicit psychopathological dimension, Rondi wanted to develop it in a different direction than the finished film. By examining "additional scenes," one realizes that Rondi's film has several elements in common with *L'orribile segreto del dr. Hichcock* (1962, Riccardo Freda). Just like Freda's film, *Più tardi Claire, più tardi ...* was meant to be about a respectable member of the upper class who secretly cultivates a "horrible secret," a devouring sexual pathology which is known and protected by his kin: the caste is willing to do whatever it takes in order to save itself, at all costs. Rondi was less interested in the final twist than in the attitude of Dennison's relatives. In the filmed ending, they are *de facto* accomplices of his crime, and eventually chase away the "intruder" who took Claire's place in order to protect not only the judge, but their own *status quo* as well.

In the unfilmed script, the "horrible secret" of Judge Dennison was depicted in an extraordinarily daring Buñuelian dream sequence: the judge finds himself in the middle of an orgy in the woods where all his family and friends are involved, while Lemoine's character (a music teacher) directs the couplings just like an orchestra conductor, in front of an ecstatic, applauding crowd. What is more, Rondi had conceived an even more morbid denouement, which dealt with sexual neurosis, voyeurism and scopophiliac tendencies. The director's own handwritten notes on the script suggest that part of the climax was actually shot and edited: it patently recalls *Psycho*, with necrophiliac suggestions rendered explicit by the sight of Claire's mummified body, wearing a sumptuous evening dress and a line of pearls around her neck. Rondi's ending also featured a delirious monologue which culminated with Dennison's confession of his own impotence and voyeurism: "I was never happy with Claire as other husbands are with their wives.... I always loved to create with my imagination, to invent the deepest pleasures, the most daring situations. My pleasure is in the eyes, in the sight, in the objects.

Whatever Claire touched, or whoever touched her. Because I loved to suffer, I loved to be miserable. I wanted her to betray me, to punish me, but I needed to watch her … always." Dennison killed Claire because she rebelled to that morbid relationship and threatened to reveal the truth.

However, none of this can be found in the finished ending, which recycles several early scenes (with the addition of a voiceover) and reduces the mystery to a banal love triangle: it turns out Dennison had punished his unfaithful wife after discovering her affair with another man. At a certain point Ann discovers a skull with a wig, but it is not quite clear what it is all about. It looks slapdash and badly assembled.

Maybe, with Rondi's additions *Più tardi Claire, più tardi …* would have been met by the audience and critics with more enthusiasm, and would have found better chances abroad. Or maybe not. By the time it came out the interest toward black-and-white Gothic mysteries had waned, and it would have probably passed unnoticed anyway amidst the flood of sex and violence that was starting to fill the screens.

## *Bergman on the Amalfi Coast*

In the mid–1960s, Brunello Rondi was undergoing a deeply creative period. In January 1966, he debuted with his new play, *La stanza degli ospiti* ("The Guests' Room"), starring Arnoldo Foà, Lea Padovani and Marina Malfatti,[31] and around the same time he developed some more projects, while concurrently working on Federico Fellini's next film, *L'assurdo universo*, which would become *Il viaggio di G. Mastorna*. When interviewed by Mario Foglietti right after finishing *Più tardi Claire, più tardi…*, he claimed to have several scripts in the drawer, "all of them stories which revolve around a certain type of crisis of personal relationships among individuals in a … bourgeois and aristocratic environment." Among them there was *La ragazza che dice di sì* ("The Girl Who Says Yes"), to be filmed in Yugoslavia, about a young woman "who lives in a magic environment, a kind of modern fief, and who believes, by saying "Yes" to everyone, to have reached the supreme way and moment of her own social security. The film is about … her possible evolution, of her finding her dignity again…."[32] In a way, it was yet another study of Rondi's favorite "wild girl" characters, such as Purif in *Il demonio* or Ruth in *Più tardi Claire, più tardi…*, as well as many of his future heroines.

But *La ragazza che dice di sì* was destined to oblivion, just as many other projects of the period. Such were *La compagna di viaggio*, the story of a top-class escort in four episodes set in various nations, including Finland and Ethiopia, and *L'agenzia*, a vehicle for Ugo Tognazzi, with whom Brunello had acted in a rare stint before the camera, in Luciano Salce's vitriolic comedy *Le ore dell'amore* (1963). As Rondi claimed, "We have to create comedies that have a minimum level of dignity and style, a minimum of cultural bite. I have always asked myself why the French can make films such as *Jules et Jim*, and the English can make masterpieces such as *The Loved One*, while we have been dealing for years with jokes on conjugal betrayal or demonstrations of virility."[33]

*L'agenzia* (also known with the title *The Public-Relations-Man*) was a sort of update on *La dolce vita*, and at the same time a grim comedy in the vein of Pietro Germi's masterful *Signore & Signori* (1966). It is the story of a P.R. agent who puts to best use his

**Left to right: Brunello Rondi, Mara Berni, Emmanuelle Riva and Ugo Tognazzi in a scene from *Le ore dell'amore* (1963, Luciano Salce), a one-time acting stint for Rondi (courtesy Nocturno Cinema).**

ability to persuade people, and becomes a mastermind of the chaotic Rome jet-set, until he finally undergoes a conscience crisis. In the script, Rondi even described the movie as "La Dolce Vita '66": it was obviously a heartfelt, ambitious project, and it is a pity it was never filmed. It is also a very pessimistic and disillusioned work, which shows the frustration of living in a world where "appearing" is much more important than "being": but if Rondi the philosopher despised such a world, Rondi the director had to accept more and more compromises in the years to come.

Another unfilmed project dating around the same period was *Il marchese de Sade*, announced by Mino Loy and Luciano Martino's company Zenith, starring Robert Hossein as the Marquis. Even though Rondi explained that the character would be depicted according to the interpretation given by Albert Camus (the absolute denial of God in the name of nature, identified with the sexual instinct), this time he was not the author of the script, signed by Martino.[34]

Rondi's official third film as a director (actually his fourth, as we have seen) was *Domani non siamo più qui* ("Tomorrow We Will Not Be Here"), a black-and-white drama starring Ingrid Thulin. Shooting took place in several weeks, between the late summer[35] and early fall of 1966,[36] on the Amalfi coast. It was possibly an evolution of the project initially announced as *Diario d'una tossicomane*: the story revolves around Gioia (Thulin), an American woman still shocked by the death of her little daughter, who arrives at her brother's villa at Amalfi, inhabited by the airhead Grazia (Maria Grazia Buccella); soon Gioia's anguish and pain turn into an aggressive sexual behavior, as she seduces the local doctor (Luigi Vannucchi) and a young philosophy student, Dionigi (Robert Hoffmann).

Thulin's casting showed Rondi's intention to shoot a psychological drama in the vein of Ingmar Bergman (in 1963 he wrote a passionate essay on *Tystnaden*, a.k.a. *The Silence*), even more so considering that initially the director's ideal casting choice for

the role of the doctor was Gunnar Björnstrand (whereas Tomas Milian was to play Dionigi), but another obvious influence were Antonioni's films on "incommunicability."

Even though the fluvial dialogue has aged badly, Rondi's portrayal of his protagonist's neurosis is precise, and his approach to eroticism is much more intense, thoughtful and problematic than in many films of the period. This led to some trouble with the censors: a scene when the doctor kisses Grazia's breast had to be eliminated for the film to be passed with a V.M.18 rating. Interestingly, Rondi radically changed the ending: the original script climaxed with Dionigi stabbing Gioia in a fit of rage and fleeing the villa; the caretaker then closes the villa for the winter season without noticing Gioia's body. It was a grim and dark denouement that perhaps would have made the film more palatable for younger film buffs and critics who started rediscovering Rondi's work in the 1990s, misleadingly labeling films like *Più tardi Claire, più tardi ...* and *Le tue mani sul mio corpo* as (admittedly *sui generis*) *gialli*. The filmed ending has Dionigi leaving Gioia alone but very much alive at the villa, and the woman seems at least at peace with her own mind: the title refers to Gioia finally coming to terms with the transient nature of human life.

Once again, formally *Domani non siamo più qui* was a beautiful work, which nonetheless made a scarce impression at the box office when released in March 1967, after its screening at the Berlin Film Festival. Meanwhile, Rondi's new play *Gli amanti* (written a few years earlier) finally debuted on stage in April 1967, with Rondi himself directing, and starring Anna Proclemer and Giorgio Albertazzi. It is centered on a rich woman who has little time left to live due to an incurable disease, and who starts a relationship with a younger man she met by chance, without telling him about her disease. He eventually discovers it, but pretends he doesn't know anything, in order to let her live her final days in contentment. The play was a success, and it was adapted into a movie, *Amanti* (a.k.a. *A Place for Lovers*), directed in 1968 by Vittorio De Sica and starring a prestigious couple of leads: Faye Dunaway and Marcello Mastroianni. Another stage play followed the next year: *Shocking*, a three-act play originally titled *L'amore*, or *L'amore pazzo*, which possibly dated back to 1966, and centered on the attraction between a married woman and her female friend. Once again Rondi cured the stage direction, with a cast that comprised Olga Villi, Eleonora Rossi Drago and Carlo Hintermann: it premiered in November 1968, to tepid reviews.[37]

If Rondi the playwright was on the crest of the wave, Rondi the filmmaker was finding it difficult to mount his next work. Two more projects came to a dead end, ominously predated by the announcement that Fellini's *Il viaggio di G. Mastorna*, which Rondi had scripted with Dino Buzzati, and which had undergone a troubled preproduction, with threats of a legal action on the part of producer Dino De Laurentiis, had been postponed, and with Marcello Mastroianni no longer playing the lead[38]; it would become the most notorious of Fellini's unmade films.

While still editing *Domani non siamo più qui*, Rondi announced the ambitious *Mille e non più Mille*, a story set in the year 1000 A.D. which dealt with fears of the Apocalypse, love, power and death in the violent Middle Ages. Orson Welles would play the role of a cruel one-eyed Count, loosely based on a historical character, who falls for a young peasant girl and persecutes her and her husband. "I intend to paint a

deeply violent medieval time, as the Japanese have done in *The Seven Samurai*. And I believe, moreover, that today, while the Western genre is fading, the Middle Ages can offer inspiration for a new thread, through the epic events that will highlight the raw and violent contrasts."[39] Shooting would start in March 1968, with Maria Grazia Buccella and Robert Hoffmann as the two young innocents persecuted by the Count; the director had already scouted locations in Puglia, but eventually the project was dropped. Despite the defeat of *Mille e non più Mille*, Rondi wasn't wrong: in a few years, the Middle Ages would offer material for a popular new thread … only not in the epic way he imagined, as the so-called "Decamerotics" would show.

The second venture Rondi dropped out of in 1967 was *Honeymoon*, a thriller he allegedly co-wrote with Luciano Martino. In an article dated October 1967[40] the director announced that in late November he would start shooting the movie in Geneva and the French Riviera with Carroll Baker and Jean Sorel, but one look at plot and characters' names reveals that this is the same film that eventually came out the following March as *Il dolce corpo di Deborah* (*The Sweet Body of Deborah*, 1968), directed by Romolo Guerrieri. Despite the article's assertions, *Deborah*'s screenwriter Ernesto Gastaldi was adamant that Rondi was not involved at all in the project, and the script kept at Rome's CSC (titled *Il dolce corpo di Deborah—Luna di miele*) is indeed signed by Gastaldi and Martino. However, given that in November 1967 he was still announced as director, and the shooting would start imminently,[41] it is likely that Rondi was replaced at the eleventh hour by Guerrieri. In the October 1967 article the director announced yet another picture, to be filmed in the Swedish islands and starring Sorel, Candice Bergen and Enrico Maria Salerno: a modern-day version of *Tristan and Isolde*, which followed the same sad fate as the previous ones.

The period between 1967 and 1970 is vital to understand what happened to Brunello Rondi's career. He was particularly active on many sides, with many projects as a director which didn't materialize, and just as many scripts written for other directors: *Arabella* (1967, Mauro Bolognini), for which Rondi only wrote the story, was a breezy period comedy set in the Fascist era and starring Virna Lisi, James Fox and Terry-Thomas, about a young noblewoman who tries to save her family wealth by seducing and conning people; *Le sorelle* (1969, Roberto Malenotti), initially titled *Fuori gioco*,[42] was a morbid drama starring Susan Strasberg and Nathalie Delon as siblings tied by an incestuous subterranean relationship; last but not least, Pasquale Festa Campanile's astonishing *Scacco alla regina* (1969, co-written with Tullio Pinelli from the novel by Renato Ghiotto) was a wild, psychedelic drama about a rich girl (Haydée Politoff) with masochistic fantasies who becomes the slave of a decadent, tyrannical actress (Rosanna Schiaffino) who takes great pleasure in humiliating her employees.

The latter two films are perfect examples of the growing role of eroticism in Italian cinema after 1968. *Le sorelle*, with its luscious lensing, soft-focus flashbacks and implied morbidity, is a typical art film wannabe, while *Scacco alla regina* features copious amounts of nudity in a plot revolving around sexual obsession, in a world where everything—including people—can be purchased and reduced to a thing, a theme dear to philosophers such as Adorno and Marcuse, and often alluded to in Italian movies of the period: think of Corrado Farina's vampire allegory *… Hanno cambiato faccia*. Incidentally, Farina himself was assistant director on an unreleased film Rondi co-

scripted, *Sortilegio* (1969), directed by Nardo Bonomi and starring Erna Schurer and Marco Ferreri. It was a strange, unclassifiable film, partially inspired by the work of Aleister Crowley, about a woman driven to suicide by her husband with the help of a mysterious cult.

Rondi's interest in the occult and esotericism, which would feature prominently in *Tecnica di un amore*, also characterized another unfilmed project of the period: *La sensitiva*. Co-written with Tullio Pinelli, and to be directed by Maleno Malenotti, it drew on a theme that would be common to several Italian films of the following decade, such as *Sette note in nero* (1977, Lucio Fulci). The story is centered on another unusual witch figure, after *Il demonio*: the protagonist, Elena (Pinelli and Rondi were considering Silvana Mangano for the role), is a psychic whose powers to foresee the future threaten to destroy her conjugal life. The woman will not be exorcised, but will be cured by a psychoanalyst, who finds out that her neurosis has a sexual origin and could be cured by maternity. But Elena keeps having visions of the future, and "sees" her husband's death in a car accident....[43] Once again, Rondi's interest was centered on female characters who cannot find or keep their place in society, and develop extreme escapist ways to reject the rules they can no longer follow. If in the retrograde South neurosis took the form of devil possession, here—in homage to the period's growing interest in the occult—it manifests as a psychic ability. Either way, the protagonist is seen as ill, crazy, and dangerous, and as such she is ousted by civic society. It would be a key theme in several of Rondi's future efforts.

## *The Discreet Neurosis of the Bourgeoisie*

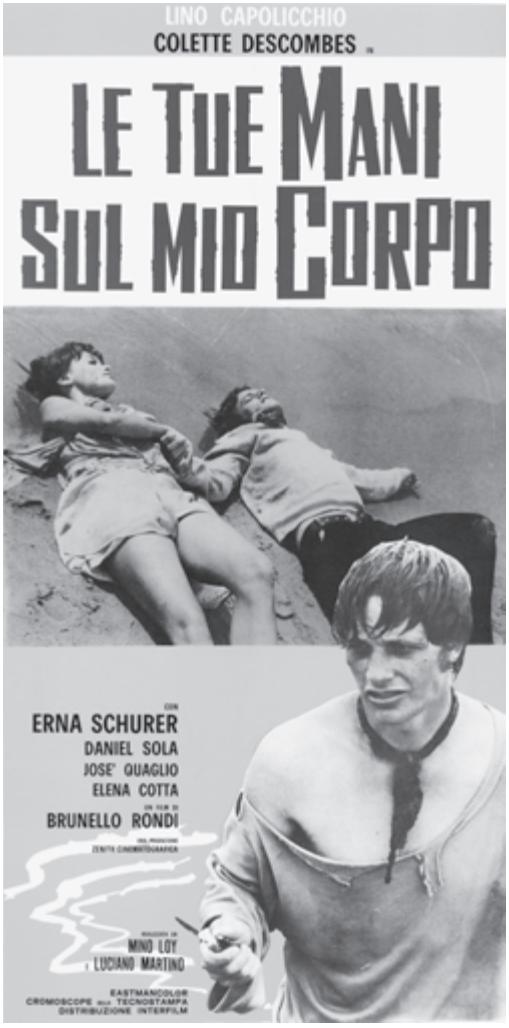
Brunello Rondi returned behind the camera in the summer of 1969,[44] to direct another film for Luciano Martino, based on a story by the producer, and co-scripted by Francesco Scardamaglia. It was a compromise of some sort, starting with the title: initially Rondi had opted for *Questo amore così tenero, così violento, così fragile ... così disperato* ("This Love So Tender, So Violent, So Fragile.... So Hopeless"), a paraphrase of the opening verses in Jacques Prévert's poem *Cet amour*. It then became *Shocking*, like the director's own play, and eventually the decidedly less poetic *Le tue mani sul mio corpo* ("Your Hands on My Body").

The story follows a disturbed rich young man, Andrea (Lino Capolicchio), haunted by a childhood trauma (he saw his mother drown in the sea), who acts as an irresponsible spoiled brat and repeatedly provokes his beautiful young stepmother Mireille (Erna Schurer, in a role initially destined to Nathalie Delon). The attraction for an American girl (Colette Descombes) seems to cure him, but after they make love Andrea takes her to the beach and kills her (in an early version of the script, it was the contrary).

Capolicchio's character is as an evolution of Lou Castel's Alessandro in *I pugni in tasca*, just as Purif was its anticipation, and is also quite similar to the one played by Capolicchio in Roberto Faenza's feature film debut *Escalation* (1968), another study of the disintegration of the middle class. Rondi's depiction of the moral cancer devouring the bourgeois family is displayed in the estranged relationship between Mireille, Andrea and his father Mario (José Quaglio). If Andrea's regressive impulses and his desire to

become a child again symbolize the immaturity of a whole generation, Mario—a wealthy publisher specialized in those glossy magazines exposing naked women on the cover that perfectly represent the way sexual enlightenment has been incorporated, neutralized and put to commercial use by capitalism—says: "We want to save from oblivion and bring to the masses everything that is visible and intelligible in art … and those masses are following us."

To a Catholic like Rondi, the point was not to focus on the evils of capitalism, but on the loss of moral and cultural values that accompanied the dissolution of Italian culture, a danger that was becoming evident to intellectuals like Pier Paolo Pasolini and Alberto Cavallone. The discourse on the commercialization of the female body results in a surreal scene which predates Cavallone's *Spell—dolce mattatoio*, in which Andrea compares a naked female body to that of a bovine, playing with a life-size female figure who's discomposed in different pieces representing various beef cuts.




**Italian poster for *Le tue mani sul mio corpo* (1970).**

Once again, the director told the story of a neurosis, this time from a young male's point of view. Andrea's visions include oneiric flashbacks of his youth—such as a terrific primal vision of sex and death, as the young boy watches his dead mother having her clothes taken off by two nuns on her death bed, an image worthy of Buñuel—while his sexual obsession has him filming the unaware Carol as she is making love with her boyfriend. Rondi claimed he would use color in a peculiar way, to enhance the cold and superficial wealth of Andrea's everyday world on one hand, and the fantasies in which the young man immerses himself on the other. Unfortunately, he failed to shape a satisfying third act, and the film (promoted as a lurid erotic thriller) stands uneasily between would-be art film and genre. Upon its release, in the spring of 1970, *Le tue mani sul mio corpo* collected harsh reviews. Giovanni Grazzini panned it in the *Corriere della Sera*:

> Interpreting ancient myths with the well-worn key of literary café psychoanalysis, but pushed also by the ambition of criticizing morals, Brunello Rondi seems by now settled on the fragile battlements of a cinema which, when it doesn't take refuge in Fellini-esque echoes, attempts to penetrate the meanderings of insane souls by reinventing stylistic instruments by this time corroded by

> hacks. His film was born without a doubt from sincere concerns, but since nude breasts and turbid looks are not enough to support a persuasive narrative, this panerotic vision of existence lacks dramatic density, and is placed in an unreality of a clear intellectualistic matrix.[45]

*Le tue mani sul mio corpo* is a key work to analyze Rondi's path. With his following output, he would fully embrace erotic cinema, partly out of necessity, partly because it suited his own interests as a key to explore the changing face of Italian society: his later films would delve more and more into sexual behavior, while exploring the decadence of feelings, the objectification of the female body, the connection between economic and sexual power. Inevitably, critics often focused on the mere erotic element, accusing Rondi of "selling out" and ironizing on the uneasy way his intellectual pretensions were spiced with nudity and soft-core sex. Compromises were inevitable, from the smaller budgets to the lurid and allusive titles. Yet Rondi's output in the 1970s, albeit discontinuous, was nevertheless interesting and provocative, fluctuating in a no man's land between genre and commitment, but ultimately hard to swallow for both genre fans (who, despite the copious amounts of nudity and morbidity, were treated with depressing storylines, ponderous dialogue, slow pacing) and art film buffs (for the exact opposite reasons).

Originally just titled *Valeria* or *V. come Valeria* (V. for Valeria), the script of Rondi's sixth film germinated at least three years before it was shot, in early 1972: the director mentioned it was already finished in July 1969, when he was about to start work on *Le tue mani sul mio corpo*. Rondi told the press that the idea came to him from the true story of an acquaintance, an upper-class woman who had been hospitalized by her husband in a mental institution, as well as from a visit he and Fellini paid to an asylum for an undeveloped project based on Mario Tobino's novel *Le libere donne di Magliano.*[46] The director also drew on the growing debate around the condition of the mentally ill, and the rise of Anti-psychiatry, with contributions by the likes of Michel Foucault, C. D. Laing, Thomas Szasz, Franco Basaglia, which also inspired other films of the period, such as Nelo Risi's *Diario di una schizofrenica* (1968) and Liliana Cavani's *L'ospite* (1971, starring Lucia Bosé and Peter Gonzales). For the script, he asked the consultancy of the noted psychiatrist Aldo Semerari. "Valeria is a tormented personality, probably richer and more gifted than other creatures. She should be helped to express herself and instead is, on the contrary, oppressed by society," Rondi explained. "Hence the distortions and deviations of Valeria, a woman who, in practice, is being prevented from healing, hence her boundless solitude and her slide into madness, in that realm where reality surpasses the dream."[47]

For the role of Valeria, a rich woman who is neglected by her husband, and whose unhappiness and loneliness allow her neurosis to develop into a mental disorder, Rondi had initially thought of Erna Schurer[48]; eventually he cast Barbara Bouchet, who gave quite a convincing performance in a role different from her usual ones, while Schurer played a supporting role. Her husband David, a successful electronic composer, was played by Pier Paolo Capponi: Rondi's proficiency as a musicologist shows in the director's juxtaposition of a cold, abstract electronic score (by Franco Bixio) for Valeria's conjugal life to serene classical pieces in the asylum scenes, where they act as a contrast to the staff's inhuman methods. The film came out in May 1972 as *Valeria dentro e fuori* (Valeria Inside and Outside), the crude double-entendre stressing the erotic element. But even though Rondi seemingly brings back the protagonist's illness (as well

as that of other inmates as well) to a sexual neurosis, allowing for ample nude scenes, the depiction of Valeria's case is nonetheless powerful and a rather uncompromising "portrait of a woman's condition in a capitalistic society,"[49] as one critic wrote.

"I don't like pale-skinned women," the contemptuous David says, displaying a fetishistic attention to appearance mirrored by the cold, detached house he and Valeria live in: with its black painted walls and abstract patterns, it's already a cell in disguise. To David, Valeria is just a thing: first she is a trophy to be shown at parties and a sexual object, then a source of inspiration for his music. Not a Muse, beware: as he witnesses Valeria being examined by the doctors (who perform a painful lumbar puncture on the woman), David feverishly composes music, turning Valeria's screams of pain into notes. His vision is methodical, mathematical and cold, he can only draw inspiration from physical phenomena but cannot understand his companion's soul. David's sadistic, fascinated stare as he watches the lunatics in the final scene hints that he's possibly as insane as them, yet he is perfectly integrated in a soulless world, cold and suffocating as a gigantic padded cell: that's exactly what Rondi meant to depict. However, albeit with a few exceptions, the critics were severe, blaming the insistence on "nudity, simulated orgasms, sexual degenerations, exhibited by Rondi more to box-office glory than to depict madness' fantastic potential."[50] Bouchet's presence, the film's commercial asset, was also heavily criticized. By this time, Rondi could not shake off the label critics had pinned on him: to most, he was just a pretentious would-be-*auteur* with a soft spot for morbid eroticism. In the flood of sex and nudity that invaded the screen, his work was seen as no different from those by so many cheap hacks who knocked out pretentious erotic flicks; and he probably was not able to choose another path anymore.

Compromises meant bowing to popular genres. A few years earlier Rondi had predicted a renewed interest in the Middle Ages: that's exactly what happened after the *succès de scandale* of Pasolini's *Il Decameron* (1971). Dozens of sex comedies set in that era, loosely based on Italian 14th century literature as a pretext to have beautiful women take off their clothes, with vulgar and humorous titles and stories about cuckold husbands, horny friars and sex-hungry wives: that was the "Decamerotic" genre, and that's where Rondi ended up with his next film … more or less.

Soon after *Valeria*'s release, the director was already at work on a new project, *Maestro d'amore* (Master of Love), a title that paid homage to Bergman's 1954 film *En lektion i kärlek* (a.k.a. *A Lesson in Love*). "The film cannot be inserted into the rampant Boccaccio-inspired genre," he stated bluntly, adding: "To me, this sordid phenomenon we are witnessing is nothing but the exact mirror of a neo-Fascist time, with its new explosion of virility and its coarse, clumsy and indifferent humor.."[51] For one thing, the setting was not the Middle Ages but the more refined Renaissance; co-scriptwriter Roberto Leoni, who wrote the film with Rondi and Gianfranco Bucceri, explained: "We had the idea to set the film in this sort of Renaissance Eden which is not just erotic, but also adventurous and fable-like, in which there was still the gallantry, the joke, the game still existed. Then there was the advent of Decamerotics and the film was wrongly regarded as one. But it's not."[52]

Unfortunately, Rondi had to deal with producer Oscar Brazzi—a totally different type, as rude and vulgar as Brunello was refined and cultured—who, as Leoni recalled, often interfered with the scripting and shooting, and sometimes even shot additional

risqué bits himself, with Rondi abandoning the set in protest.[53] The director had hopes of adjusting the result of Brazzi's intrusiveness in the editing room, but he could do little. And when the film was released, the original title was dropped in favor of the gross *Racconti proibiti ... di niente vestiti* ("Forbidden Tales ... With No Clothes On"), which made it pass as a typical Decamerotic flick. This time critics were openly sneering. "Since Pasolini is doing it, Brunello Rondi too allowed himself a digression in period erotic comedy," the *Corriere della Sera* wrote. "After all, for the director of *Il demonio* and *Valeria dentro e fuori*, it is a chance to keep delighting himself with sexual matter without the twisted implications of his previous films."[54]

*Racconti proibiti ... di niente vestiti* deals with a mature womanizer, Lorenzo (Rossano Brazzi), who makes a bet with a priest that he will seduce the God-fearing noblewoman Lucrezia (Barbara Bouchet). He is accompanied on his journey to Lucrezia's castle by a young inexperienced man, Uccio (Ben Ekland, Britt's brother) to whom he teaches the art of seduction. The film illustrates a handful of stories during Lorenzo and Uccio's journey: a couple of young peasants (Janet Agren and Norberto Botti) are summoned to the castle of a Duke for the nobleman to exercise his *jus primae noctis*; a friar (Mario Carotenuto) performs a "miracle" by getting a woman (Paola Corazzi) pregnant in front of her unsuspecting sterile husband (Leopoldo Trieste); a sorceress (Tina Aumont) takes revenge on her unfaithful lover (Enzo Cerusico); a man goes to collect a debt and is seduced by his debtor's wife: the other man (Michael Forest) catches them in the act and sodomizes the creditor for revenge. As expected, Lorenzo wins Lucrezia's resistance (and it turns out that the woman is an avid sadomasochist) and Uccio learns his lesson well, even surpassing his teacher. Lorenzo, suddenly feeling old and tired, leaves. In the final scene, he meets Death as a beautiful naked woman (Monica Strebel) and joyously runs away with her in the fields. It is a beautiful ending, by far the best thing in the film, and Rondi's homage to Bergman's *Det sjunde inseglet* (a.k.a. *The Seventh Seal*, 1957), even though it is unlikely that viewers noticed it.

This time as well Rondi focused on the equation between sex and power, and his view on religion in a world dominated by a corrupt, debauched Church is vitriolic. The "miracle" scene, with peasants chanting in joy while the friar has sex with the woman in front of them all, brings to mind the sequence in *La dolce vita* where a crowd stands in awe waiting for the Virgin Mary to appear. Furthermore, Barbara Bouchet's character has some scenes which border on the blasphemous: in one she appears to be performing a fellatio on a young man in the pose of the crucified Christ while in fact she is washing his feet. Similarly to Vanessa Redgrave in *The Devils* (1971, Ken Russell), Lucrezia finds sexual gratification through pain and self-humiliation: even though Rondi treats it in a humorous way, the scene where the woman is whipped by Brazzi until her back bleeds and she eventually reaches an orgasm, is unsettling and unpleasant, as Bouchet even wears a crown of thorns. Buñuel would have loved it.

## *Moral Tales of Sex and Violence*

Rondi's eighth film, produced by Carlo Maietto and *Playmen* publisher Adelina Tattilo, was a little seen erotic drama which originated from an unfilmed Piero Regnoli

project, *Stimulation*. Regnoli was to shoot it in 1968 as an Italian-German co-production, starring Luigi Vannucchi, Brigitte Skay and Brad Harris. However, the German producer backed out and the project was shelved; in 1972 Regnoli resumed it under the new title *Spiaggia rocciosa*, but Maietto, who purchased the rights to the script, hired Rondi to direct.

Brunello made several changes to the script, including the tragic ending. That said, the story has many things in common with his early work: set in the beautiful Tirrenian isle of Ponza, it features five main characters and an almost theatrical structure, which culminates in a tragic third act. After ten years, the marriage between Sabina (Erna Schurer) and Andrea (Silvano Tranquilli) is just a boring, heartless mess: he is an embittered poet who earns a living by creating publicity taglines for a political party, she is interested in esotericism and visits a rich promiscuous woman who lives on a yacht and poses as a pagan priestess (Paola Corazzi: the character was one of Rondi's additions, and further evidence of the director's interest in the occult). The arrival of a beautiful and uninhibited Swedish girl, Monika (Janet Agren), and her Greek boyfriend (Norberto Botti) brings new spark to the conjugal relationship: eventually Andrea goes to bed with Monika while his wife makes love with Yorgo. Haunted by remorse, Sabina commits suicide and Andrea kills Monika and Yorgo with a shotgun.

Shot in late 1972 and announced first as *Le scogliere del sogno*[55] and then as *Le scogliere rocciose*,[56] the film came out next spring as *Tecnica di un amore*, not without some censorship issues. It was initially rejected by the Board with the motivation that it was "based around an obsessive eroticism," and the dialogue and certain sequences were "described with such a raw sexual realism that they offend the common sense of morality." It passed in appeal with a V.M.18 rating, after several cuts were performed. Some critics, such as Leonardo Autera, the author of the scathing review of *Racconti proibiti ... di niente vestiti* in the *Corriere della Sera*, were harsh to the point of insult; others, such as Guglielmo Biraghi and Callisto Cosulich (who noted the derisive use of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* in contrast with the characters' mediocrity), were moderately favorable; but the film failed to get the attention it deserved.

Starting with its enigmatic, almost self-mocking title (which translates to "Technique of a Love"), *Tecnica di un amore* seems like a bitter endnote to Antonioni's cinema of alienation: sparse characters and plot, somnolent pacing, tormented dialogue. Again, sex is a tool of power and manipulation, and Monika—a cold, emotionless figure which somehow recalls Terence Stamp's enigmatic character in Pasolini's *Teorema*—is a dark angel of destruction, appearing out of nowhere to destroy the feeble and illusory house of cards that is Andrea and Sabina's marriage. All this is topped by a sense of loss, as if it's too late to go back and recover one's mistakes and bad choices. Andrea's character, a frustrated intellectual who sold out to Power, displays autobiographical traits, while the final explosion of violence, with Monika and her boyfriend succumbing to death in slow-motion, is as unexpected as it is desperate, displaying Rondi's disillusion toward the era of sexual liberation and its effects on the Italian bourgeoisie. His following output would be even rawer and more pessimistic, although critics failed to notice it: unlike in the previous decade, his name appeared scarcely in the news, and his films were usually got rid of in a handful of lines, in hastily-written reviews, or passed virtually unnoticed.

That was the case with *Ingrid sulla strada*, again produced by Maietto and starring the producer's future wife, Janet Agren, released in October 1973. Like *Tecnica di un amore*, it was initially rejected by the board of censors, who objected that the film was obscene "due to the repeated sequences of exasperated sexual violence, manifesting itself through the representation of an environment of prostitution, rape and unnatural relationships." It was passed with a V.M.18 rating after several cuts (for about 20 seconds) had been made, although some members (including the president) voted for the film to be banned for its overall obscenity.

*Ingrid sulla strada* (Ingrid on the Road) is the story of a Finnish girl (Janet Agren) who, after being raped by her drunken father, moves to Rome to be a prostitute. There, she befriends a good-hearted whore (Francesca Romana Coluzzi) whose lover Renato (Franco Citti) is the head of a neo-Fascist squad, and this leads to tragedy. Rondi's description of the prostitution underworld is often grotesque (Enrico Maria Salerno pops up as a necrophile high-class customer, in a scene loosely inspired by Buñuel's *Belle de jour*), and his satire of the debauched élite is as biting as in *Roma bene* (1971, Carlo Lizzani), but he lets comedy and tragedy clash with uneasy results. It almost looks as if the director wanted once again to go back to *La dolce vita*: the Rome we get to see in *Ingrid sulla strada* is a wild mess, filled with disillusioned artists, perverted noblemen, neo–Nazis and bombings. It is a hysterical and cruel microcosm, a Babel about to collapse, "a city full of nothingness," as Salerno's character says. Ingrid, like Rondi's other heroines, is a wild, crazy product of a sick society: she willingly chooses to be a prostitute, but her neurotic behavior is caused by a childhood sexual trauma. She deludes herself she can dominate males by having them pay for her body, but she ends up being exploited and badly humiliated, so that suicide looks like the only option to her.

Overall, *Ingrid sulla strada* is an extraordinarily harsh, even repellent work. Audiences were probably bewildered: the film was too vulgar and violent for intellectuals, yet too intellectualistic for those who paid their ticket to watch a skin flick. In the film's most shocking scene, Renato tortures a band member (Luciano Rossi) who betrayed him. He forces him to eat a bowl of excrement, mocks him cruelly ("It's top-quality shit, just what should be offered to spies and traitors like you. This evening there's nothing else on the menu, is there, *maître*?"), stubs out a cigarette on the man's tongue ("After a good meal, a cigarette's just what you need!"). Then he cuts off his tongue with a razor. This almost unbearable sequence predates similar moments in *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*, where Paolo Bonacelli's character has a girl eat feces and then a boy's tongue is cut off. As film historian Alberto Pezzotta noted, "it's likely that Pasolini had seen the film (or Citti mentioned it to him) and perhaps he thought of it when shooting *Salò*. Which adds a different perspective (of the widespread violence in the criminal sub-proletarian Roman underworld) on *Salò*'s final tortures."[57] The scene then moves on to further excesses: Ingrid is gang-raped by Renato and his men, and the violence is filmed by another band member, just like the torturers did in *Salò*'s final scene. Rondi even throws in a grim in-joke, as Renato instructs the impromptu cameraman: "Do many close ups, and don't use the zoom—that's amateurish!" Given the predominance of zooms in Italian cinema of the period, one wonders whether Rondi was bitterly mocking his peers. Had he put more control on his own script and direction, *Ingrid sulla*

*strada* could have been a minor masterpiece. Even though flawed, it remains an interesting work, undeservedly ignored by critics and audience alike. Adding insult to injury, in France it was spiced with crude hardcore inserts.

The same destiny awaited the French version of *Prigione di donne*, the director's third and last film for Maietto, released in mid–August 1974. Rondi's take on the "women in prison" genre benefited from a more drastically political script, written with the cooperation of Aldo Semerari, and paid homage to Renato Castellani's *Nella città l'inferno* (1958) with the character of the prostitute (Marilù Tolo), modeled on that played by Anna Magnani in Castellani's film. The story of an innocent French girl (Martine Brochard) arrested in a drug bust allowed the director to depict the shortcomings of the Italian justice system, seen as an instrument of institutional repression of the lower class' instances, with the cooperation of the Church: the prison is led by an elderly, grotesque Mother Superior (Maria Cumani Quasimodo, the ex-wife of the Nobel prize winning poet Salvatore Quasimodo) who, in a memorable sequence, has the inmates pray at dinner in exchange for a glass of vermouth: a moment similar to a scene in *Valeria dentro e fuori*, where the nuns brought desserts to quell a rebellion of the patients at dinner. Yet Rondi did not shy away from the required amount of naked flesh, masturbations, lesbian trysts, shower scenes (slightly trimmed in order to obtain a V.M.18 rating[58]); for once the erotic content feels like a half-hearted commercial compromise, devoid of the poignancy of his previous films, particularly *Tecnica di un amore*. As a result, *Prigione di donne* is one of the director's less convincing works.

**Left to right: Katia Christine, Erna Schurer and Marilù Tolo in *Prigione di donne* (1974) (courtesy Lucas Balbo).**

## On the Road to Excess

Shot in September and October 1975,[59] Rondi's eleventh feature film as a director had the working title *Il prosseneta*,[60] later changed to *I prosseneti*, and was advertised as an answer of sorts to Carlo Lizzani's grim inquiry on prostitution, *Storie di vita e malavita* (1975). Coming after a rather conventional work as *Prigione di donne*, it was a decidedly more personal and focused effort, starting with the title—a juridical term for "panders." As customary, the director chose to set the narrative within a strictly defined environment, a luxurious villa outside Rome whose owners, Count Davide (Alain Cuny) and his wife Gilda (Juliette Mayniel) manage a racket of high-class escorts for wealthy clients: a sadistic mercenary (Jean Valmont) re-enacts the torture of a helpless victim (Stefania Casini); a stage director (played by film director Luciano Salce in one of the film's funniest scenes) sets up an elaborate staging inspired by Joseph Conrad's novels, reimagining the villa's garden as a tropical island and having the young prostitute (Silvia Dionisio) play a native; an ambassador (José Quaglio) has a girl (Ilona Staller) act as his old estranged flame.

The mocking, surreal tone—such as Cuny's monologue on an exercise bike—recalls Buñuel at times, and once again Rondi's target is the Italian *bourgeoisie*, while the film's theme is prevarication in its many forms—sexual, economical, physical and mental. The lower classes are exploited and corrupted, as shown by the episode of a naive young Southern girl, Linda (Consuelo Ferrara), who is taken to the villa, drugged and forced to serve a client's desires. The morning after, as she cries in shame and despair, she is coldly given her pay for the day and told that she can either leave or stay in the villa as one of the Counts' "girls." Moreover, the young and their beauty are exploited and vampirized by the old. "The most expected guest—without offending anyone—has arrived: youth itself. The object of all our anxieties, all our regrets. What we have never been … that which we will never be," Count Davide announces as the 18-year-old Jules (Sonja Jeannine) shows up at the party on a motorbike.

The Count and his wife are worthy descendants of Freda's elderly countess (Gianna Maria Canale) who fed on the blood of young women in *I vampiri* (1957): here Jules is groped by a bunch of slimy elderly guests who verse champagne and food on her naked body, as if they want to consume and devour the very essence of her youth.[61] It's a moment that harks back to the final orgy in *La dolce vita*, but also recalls the chilling feast that ends *Il profumo della signora in nero* (1974, Francesco Barilli). "Do you want my eighteen years? I open my veins and I offer you my blood. I will be your food, eating me will bring a bit of my youth in you … eat me, drink me, kill me if you like, but do it quickly though because I'm leaving in half an hour!" Jules says. As Pasolini stated in *Salò*, victims have become the accomplices of their torturers, and the film ends with Linda coming back to the villa, now fully aware of her role and hopelessly corrupted.

*I prosseneti* was released to general indifference on April 28, 1976. Few critics noticed Rondi's intentions, while most dismissed the film as insufferably pretentious and shamelessly exploitative, if not a mere excuse to display "the director's repressed dreams."[62] *I prosseneti* didn't perform well at the box-office either: too risqué to be taken seriously, too intellectualistic for the raincoat brigade. However, today Rondi's discourse is clearer and stronger than ever. As with *Ingrid sulla strada*, cinema is depicted as a

medium of power, in a scene featuring an 8mm film juxtaposed with a sexual encounter. Sex itself has become a pantomime, a play (explicitly so in the Salce episode), with all the passion and the joy replaced by a rigid set of rules and roles. As an Italian critic noted in a recent analysis of the film, Rondi's vision predates "a reality based solely on images, where woman becomes a bribe and replaces money as an instrument of corruption; meanwhile, finance and sex are tied in an unlikely embrace, giving rise to a plutocratic system where the old feeds with the young."[63]

The director's next film was another work for hire, produced by Alfredo Bini and featuring exotic Egyptian settings and ample erotic interludes. Originally entitled *The Group—Le radici del male* (The Group—Roots of Evil) and based on a story by Ferdinando Baldi, *Velluto nero* (shot in early 1976 and released in August of that year) was a crepuscular variation on the "Black Emanuelle" cycle, starring Laura Gemser and Annie Belle, respectively as a mannequin named Emanuelle and a young uninhibited girl named Laure)[64]—thus also hinting at Belle's starring role in *Laure* (a.k.a. *Forever Emmanuelle*, 1976).[65] Like the director's previous works, it had some troubles with the censors, who demanded cuts for about 53 seconds before giving it a V.M.18 rating. It was released abroad as *Emanuelle in Egypt* and *Black Emmanuelle, White Emmanuelle* (another export title, *Smooth Velvet, Raw Silk*, was at least more similar to the Italian one, which translates as "Black Velvet"). As of today, it is Rondi's only film available on DVD in the English language.

*Velluto nero* is populated by bizarre, debauched characters (Feodor Chaliapin turns up as a decadent homosexual silent movie star who quotes Pedro Calderón de la Barca's 17th century play *Life Is a Dream*), and at times it looks like Rondi is trying to say something about the state of Italian cinema and Italy in general. In one scene, Emanuelle poses near the putrefying carcass of a dog while her lover, a fashion photographer (Gabriele Tinti) frantically shoots pics of her: "Make it look like you're in bed with him, get it?" he yells. Later on, Tinti has her pose near dead bodies, and in another scene he says: "The camera is my eyes, my nose, my penis!"[66]

Rondi's take on the *Mondo movie* includes a sarcastic retaliation on *Mondo Cane*'s director Gualtiero Jacopetti, who had once cruelly mocked *La dolce vita*. On the other hand, it is a disenchanted meditation on the road to excess that characterizes Italian cinema of the period. "It makes you happier to be alive. Disgust is edifying!" Tinti's character says. However, Rondi did not step back from competition: the group of wealthy people who gathered far away from the Western world spend their time copulating with each other and with the natives, and the director asked a lot of his lead actresses. In one scene, after a simulated fellatio performed by Crystal (Susan Scott) on a hippie guru named Antonio (Al Cliver), we get to see sperm on the actress' face, something quite daring for a soft-core film. That's not enough to make it a good film, yet with its gloomy yet sensual atmosphere, to Rondi *Velluto nero* is both a way to show his "cupio dissolvi" and an extreme act of resistance to the imminent homologation, both aesthetic and ideological.

After *Velluto nero*, Rondi stayed inactive for six years. Those who were close to him, like his son Umberto, and producer Luciano Martino, depict him as sweet and a bit naïve, perhaps too emotionally fragile, and often at the mercy of his fluctuating moods: a bipolar character, euphoric, enthusiastic and able of outstanding writing

marathons whenever a new idea for a play or a movie struck him, but also a very sensible individual, who suffered a lot when his work was harshly criticized. If *Velluto nero* marked the last drop in a series of critical debacles, and an abrupt halt in his directorial output, it didn't stop him from writing scripts and essays: in 1979, he resumed his work as a music essayist, which he had abandoned since the mid–Fifties, and contributed steadily to the newspaper *Il Giornale d'Italia* for several years.

In that period, Rondi was also busy co-scripting Fellini's *Prova d'orchestra* and *La città delle donne*; he described the latter as "a film with a demonic look, strangely Nordic for a director born in Rimini; a witches' sabbath, a cinematic Walpurgis."[67] A definition which reveals how much the script was close to Rondi's idea of the woman/witch as an irrational and devastating force, as seen in most of his films, especially *Il demonio*, *Più tardi Claire, più tardi...*, *Valeria dentro e fuori* and *Ingrid sulla strada*. This would be Rondi's last official collaboration with the Maestro, although he also contributed (uncredited) to *E la nave va* (1983) and *Ginger e Fred* (1986), a fact confirmed by Fellini's own recollections in an article on the making of the latter film.[68] The omission of Rondi's name in the credits was very painful to him, according to his son Umberto.[69]

Recently, though, the publishing of an unfilmed treatment about Greek mythology attributed to Fellini, *L'Olimpo*, apparently to be developed into a TV series, caused some controversy among scholars: the style and the content (with ample room for explicit sex) don't seem the work of Fellini, and some have suggested that *L'Olimpo* was actually penned, at least partially, by the prolific Rondi, after his friend's suggestion.[70]

## *The Hidden Side of Brunello Rondi*

For every film he helmed, Brunello Rondi seemed to have at least two or three projects that ended up in the bin, and sometimes those were more interesting than the ones that got made, or at least they showed a more complex side of the filmmaker, and one less compromised commercially. His unfilmed scripts of the 1970s are heterogeneous to say the least, and some of them would probably have made for remarkable motion pictures.

In January 1973, about to start shooting *Ingrid sulla strada*, Rondi announced in an interview three new films financed by Ugo Santalucia, the producer of Visconti's *Ludwig*: an adaptation of Lidia De Stefani's novel *La vigna di uve nere*, starring Enrico Maria Salerno, set in Morocco instead of Sicily[71]; *My Son*, starring Anne Heywood and Yul Brynner, a family drama set in the Greek islands which he would script with Gavin Lambert; and "a Snow White, a Cinderella and a Little Red Riding Hood which will become as many satiric takes on morals and modern life, in an experiment which will demystify fairytales."[72] Curiously, the latter project is very similar to Piero Regnoli's film *La principessa sul pisello* (shot in 1973 but released in 1976).[73]

Another unfilmed screenplay dated late 1974 is *L'età della ragione* (*The Age of Reason*), written with Suso Cecchi D'Amico.[74] Rondi thought of it as the story of a journey which is also a spiritual epiphany, set in Ceylon and inspired by his own trips to the Far East; a cinematic model (explicitly cited in the script) was Liliana Cavani's *Milarepa* (1974). An estranged English-Italian couple, Peter and Luciana, travel to Ceylon to find

Luciana's younger brother Robby, who has disappeared. They find him in a hospital, recovering from a drug overdose, but it turns out Robby left London not only to pursue Oriental religions, but also to break up his secret liaison with Peter. When Luciana discovers the truth, she leaves her husband and follows a Buddhist monk on a pilgrimage in the forest. Peter and Robby eventually find her, but—in a delirious ending which features a *Soldier Blue–like* massacre perpetrated by the army on Ceylonese civilians—Robby sets himself on fire like a bonze. Peter and Luciana bury his ashes by a statue of Buddha and leave together. Even though Rondi was sincerely fascinated with Buddhist rituals and planned to shoot on location, the script sounds like a confused potboiler, and the theme of male homosexuality—explored in a rather similar way by Alberto Cavallone in *Afrika*—is rather awkwardly explored. Filming was slated for February 1975.

The most bizarre and extreme of Rondi's unfilmed scripts is *Il rogo* (The Stake), a project which underwent a singular metamorphosis. In January 1974, a news article reported that Rondi was in Stockholm, where he asked Harriet Andersson, one of Bergman's favorite actresses, to star in his next film. The article described *Il rogo* as the story "of a true historical event, happened in 17th century France … a mother superior in a famous convent, after a trial with violently debated aspects … is condemned to burn at the stake, albeit innocent, with the accusation of "anomaly and devil possession."[75]—in short, a project very close to Ken Russell's *The Devils*. According to Rondi, Andersson was so enthusiastic about the role that she signed the contract without even reading the script. Shooting was to start in April, immediately after *Prigione di donne*, and the cast would include Martine Brochard as well.

However, the script for *Il rogo* in Rondi's personal archive, dated late 1974 and co-written by Adriano Bolzoni, is very different from the one the director announced. Set in the present day, it is the story of a cloistered nun, Sister Margherita, who suffers a mysterious malaise and is attracted to a young novice, Gabriella. The first part makes one think Rondi is sticking to the so-called "nunsploitation" thread, and is possibly nodding to *The Exorcist* for the depiction of Margherita's obscure condition, but a shocking twist halfway through the story catches the reader off-guard: it turns out that the nun is undergoing a biological transformation process, and turning into a male. A significant dialogue between two secondary characters goes as follows:

> "The world is becoming more and more confused, isn't it, Professor?"
> "Indeed. Now, after beatniks, Maoist Nazis and junkies we also have a nun turning into a friar."
> "For a religious that's pretty funny I'd say…."
> "The body is always the work of God, dear Folchi … or so they say."
> "If it's the work of God, Professor, then imperfection relies in the maker, not in the product."

Sister Margherita undergoes sex change surgery (which, according to the script, was to be depicted graphically), but once she has become a man, Margherita chooses to return to the monastery, and be a missionary.

Had it been filmed, *Il rogo* would have been one of the most controversial motion pictures of an already tormented decade for Italian cinema. Rondi used the theme of sex change to touch thorny subjects, such as the relationship between sexuality and religion and the winds of change that were shaking the Church; all these were paired, with an unsettling and brilliant intuition, to the physical metamorphosis undergone by

the protagonist, an idea worthy of the theorists of "body cinema." The script also quotes the Kinsey Reports and the writings by Alain de Penanster, and explores the concept of vocation to paradoxical extremes. By carefully avoiding the surreal and satirical drift, *Il rogo* risks the ridiculous at every turn, but maintains an unlikely narrative balance, and shows once again Rondi's thought-provoking and original conception of cinema, imbued with a willful, if undeniably awkward at times, approach to the issues of the present.

The theme of vocation characterizes also *Un prete in meno*, another unfilmed script dated presumably around the mid–1970s. The story, which recalls the Edwige Fenech vehicle *Grazie … nonna* (1975, Marino Girolami), revolves around the return of a young American woman named Sybil to her hometown, a small village in Piedmont where she has inherited her family's vineyard, and the sentimental (and sexual) education of her shy 15-year-old cousin Edoardo, who is destined to become a priest according to a family tradition. The script has an openly satirical tone, and Rondi mordantly outlines the bigoted and hypocritical relatives, but between the lines one can notice the theme of life slipping away, leaving only memories corrupted by time. It is a recurring feature in Rondi's work, here exemplified by the character of the elderly head of the family, who, as Sybil and Edoardo finally make love, contemplates with a magnifying glass a shell that appears to him as "a blinding image of most intimate femininity," while listening with tears in his eyes to a romance sung by tenor Tito Schipa, in a truly poignant moment.

*Love Song*, dated November 1976, was another erotic story within an exotic setting, to be produced by Summit Film (the same company that financed cheap sexy comedies such as *La supplente* and *Ecco lingua d'argento*), about a theatre director, Giuliano, who goes to Phuket, Thailand with his crew to stage a Bertolt Brecht play. The first half of the script focuses on Giuliano's sexual affairs with his four main actresses, while the arrival of the director's estranged wife turns the second half into a soft-core version of Bergman's *Scener ur ett äktenskap* (a.k.a. *Scenes from a Marriage*, 1973). The character of Giuliano, a tormented intellectual obsessed with sex, is a compendium of motifs seen in Rondi's previous films, and the description of the protagonist's conjugal crisis sounds sincere, but the script seems like a late riff on Ugo Liberatore's exotic tropical dramas on midlife crisis such as *Bora Bora* (1968), and a commercial compromise compared with the director's other unfilmed works.

Two shelved projects dated 1978 are poles apart in this respect. *La capitana* is a 350-page-long script inspired by the figure of María Remedios Del Valle, a heroine of the Argentinian fight for independence, and constructed like a popular ballad; the protagonist, whose groom has been recruited by the army on the day of the marriage and killed in battle, leaving her a widow, becomes a crazy bestower of love who wanders through the battlefields and gives her body to the soldiers, dispensing love, peace and serenity. She becomes a mythical figure, at the same time mother, wife, lover and goddess, in a war setting purportedly vague and universal, with nods to the magical realism of Latin American literature. On the other hand, *Antonio Rosmini* (subtitled *La vocazione di Carità*) is a script destined to television, on the life and works of the titular philosopher, rehabilitated after the Second Vatican Council: the didactic tone is influenced by Roberto Rossellini's made-for-TV films, and the attention to the theme of

religious vocation (referred to in the subtitle) predates the core of the director's final film.

## *A Lonely Voice*

The year 1979 saw the publishing of Rondi's seventh book of poetry, *Requiem in morte della più cara*, inspired by the loss of his beloved mother Ginetta. It showed a renewed faith and closeness to the themes of Catholicism, which eventually led to Rondi's last film, after a six-year hiatus. *La voce*, co-produced by Italian television, was presented in a collateral section at the 1982 Venice Film Festival. Leonardo Autera, one of Rondi's harshest critics, wrote that during his long silence "Rondi must have mediated on the futility and the scarce construct of a sexually-oriented cinema,"[76] with a condescension even more insulting than the words he had spent on *Tecnica di un amore*.

A drastic change from the director's previous works, *La voce* was a biopic of young Mother Teresa of Calcutta, featuring Bekim Fehmiu and Rossano Brazzi in small roles. "To catch with the means of cinema that very intimate and arcanely visible moment which is the blooming of a vocation, this seemed to me one of the most important and desirable goals that a film director can deal with."[77] It was perhaps the coronation on a discourse on the theme of vocation, which Rondi had explored in various ways in his previous works, either filmed or unfilmed.

Scripted by the director and Tullio Pinelli, the film tells episodes in the life of the 17-year-old Gongia (Liliana Tari) in 1920s Albany, which lead her to her decision of becoming a nun under the name of Suor Teresa (which, incidentally, is never uttered in the film). Even though the story has little appeal beyond the apologetic tone, and the movie is all too obviously conceived for consumption on the small screen, with its deliberate pace and didactic approach, Rondi's direction is often remarkably subdued, and the period recreation is adequate (the top-notch photography is by Zivko Zalar). Furthermore, *La voce* was yet another portrait of a woman and her relationship with the irrational and the inexplicable, a theme which had always fascinated Rondi; it was also the closing of a circle, with its emphasis on Catholic religion that had characterized his early works such as *L'assedio*.

*La voce* was broadcast on TV on Easter Monday 1983, with the explicative subtitle *Infanzia e giovinezza di Madre Teresa di Calcutta*, to favorable reviews. Alberto Bevilacqua called it "a poem by images, or a canticle by sequences, which allowed Rondi's more congenial style, of lyrical imprint, to modulate freely, and many times with reliable inspiration, removing the risk of parochial anecdote and keeping a mystical tension throughout."[78] The director even mentioned the possibility of a sequel about Mother Teresa's adult life, with Irene Papas as protagonist,[79] but it all came to nothing.

Then, Brunello Rondi stepped back into silence. His health deteriorated, and his heart problems caused his literary production to slow down drastically. He stood apart, watching Italian cinema tumble down and witnessing the triumph of commercial television, something poles apart from his didactic idea of the small screen. In one of his latest essays, dated 1986, he attacked the "disintegration of viewing, as the mind goes on in shocks, cracks and splits, risking schizophrenia."[80] His propositions for a better

television consist in giving audiences more culture, art and philosophy, treating them as thinking people and not as lobotomized puppets: Rondi even suggested having a painter paint for the camera as Picasso did in H. G. Clouzot's *Le mystère Picasso*. They sound like the words of a savior speaking against the wind.

Brunello Rondi died in Rome on November 7, 1989, at 64, just a couple of months before the release of Federico Fellini's final film *La voce della luna* (1990), another desperate cry of help against the cultural and moral agony of a whole country. In the following years, Rondi's role as Fellini's collaborator has often been overlooked and underestimated, his directorial output has been reviled and ignored, and as of today, most of his films are unreleased to home video. Yet a re-evaluation of Brunello Rondi's work is much needed. He was a vital intellectual spirit, who chose to portray his country and the times he lived—not, as Zavattini hoped he would, with the tenderness of a man who recounts his first love, but with the embittered disillusion of a betrayed lover. As with the most illuminated minds of his generation, he could foresee what was coming next. Over forty years later, the words he wrote for Romolo Valli in a scene of *Scacco alla regina* are still a chilling epitaph, more topical than ever. "Most people are afraid of freedom, they just don't want it. Freedom means responsibility, it means risk. People don't want to risk—they want security."

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## Brunello Rondi—Essential Filmography

1947 *Ultimo amore* (SC)
1950 *Francesco, giullare di Dio* (SC)
1952 *Europa '51* (SC); *Altri tempi—Zibaldone n. 1* (SC)
1960 *La dolce vita* (SC); *Era notte a Roma* (SC)
1962 *Boccaccio '70* (SC); *Una vita violenta* (D, SC)
1963 *Il demonio* (D, S, SC); *8½* (SC)
1965 *Giulietta degli spiriti* (SC)
1967 *Domani non siamo più qui* (D, S, SC); *Arabella* (SC)
1968 *Più tardi Claire, più tardi...* (D, S, SC); *Amanti* (S)
1969 *Fellini—Satyricon* (SC); *Le sorelle* (SC); *Scacco alla regina* (SC); *Sortilegio* (SC)
1970 *Le tue mani sul mio corpo* (D, SC)
1972 *Valeria dentro e fuori* (D, SC); *Racconti proibiti ... di niente vestiti* (D, SC)
1973 *Tecnica di un amore* (D, SC); *Ingrid sulla strada* (D, S, SC)
1974 *Prigione di donne* (D, S, SC)
1976 *I prosseneti* (D, S, SC); *Velluto nero* (D, SC)
1979 *Prova d'orchestra* (SC)
1980 *La città delle donne* (SC)
1982 *La voce* (D, S, SC)
1983 *E la nave va* (SC)
1986 *Ginger e Fred* (SC)

# 6

# Paolo Spinola—
# Rather Die Than Be Defiled

"I started making films a bit as an adventurer, but in the most positive sense of the term. I left Genoa for lack of space,"[1] Paolo Spinola said, recalling his beginnings. An aristocrat lent to the movie industry, the scion of one of the oldest and most important families in the city of Genoa, an ancestry of magistrates, soldiers and bankers. A navigator, like some of his most celebrated fellow citizens, but in the sea of the Seventh art, which he furrowed from time to time, with only four feature films directed over the course of two decades, and through tangential routes, sometimes hazardous, never conventional.

"I feel the need to introduce a new element in Italian cinema," he claimed at the time of his third (and penultimate) work, *La donna invisibile*. "Reality always on the border with unreality; facts, things and people that become invisible, unreal, that exist and don't exist; all this in my opinion is absolutely compelling and convincing. To the point that, sometimes, I wonder if I do really exist myself." Eventually, in fact, Paolo Spinola (1929–2005) became invisible: firstly, because of the increasing difficulty in making movies, which caused his career to halt in the late 1970s; secondly, because of the unavailability of his works on the home video market; and, lastly, because of the indifference of those critics who praised his debut, *La fuga* (1965) but then quickly grew disaffected toward that elegant, haughty type of cinema. Spinola's work has remained invisible even to the eyes of those who, digging in the Italian cinema of the past decades, linger on embarrassingly bad findings—see the cult status among cinephiles of hack filmmakers such as Renato Polselli—without noticing much more deserving ones.

The route that brought Paolo Spinola to Cinecittà passed from the Ligurian town of Alassio. There, during the war, and still a teenager, he became friends with Tonino Cervi, the son of famed actor Gino Cervi, who convinced him to move to Rome, and try his hand at making movies. In Cinecittà, Spinola gained experience as scriptwriter and assistant director, for Giorgio Franciolini (*Il mondo le condanna*, 1953; *Peccato di castità*, 1956), Giorgio Capitani (*Piscatore 'e Pusilleco*, 1955), Luigi Comencini (*La finestra sul Luna Park*, 1957), Riccardo Freda. With the latter, he also collaborated on the script of the crime film *Agguato a Tangeri* (1957), a Spanish co-production financed by Cervi and starring Edmund Purdom, Geneviève Page and Gino Cervi: not one of Freda's best works, and plagued by budget restraints which constantly conditioned the director's work on the set.[2] *Racconti d'estate* (1958), also directed by Franciolini, was based on an

idea by the famed novelist Alberto Moravia; entirely shot on location in Liguria, in the Gulf of Tigullio, it featured a top-notch cast: Alberto Sordi, Marcello Mastroianni, Gabriele Ferzetti, Sylva Koscina, Michèle Morgan. Besides Spinola, the other scriptwriters were Sergio Amidei, Ennio Flaiano and Rodolfo Sonego, that is the most prestigious names that Italian cinema could offer at that time. It looked like just the right occasion, but for almost five years Spinola had to settle on merely collaborating to scripts, make documentaries and publicity shorts in tandem with writer Luigi Malerba.

## *A Woman Flees*

The directorial debut arrived at a time when, after the economic Boom of the previous years, Cinecittà began to take on water, with the first signs of a crisis that would continue inexorably for over a decade. In Rome, there were those who called Spinola—or at least that's what some people whispered—"the director of the 'conjuncture,'" because "before, when things went well, no producer had had the time to listen to him."[3] Fortunately there were those who did: *La fuga* (The Flight), released theatrically in early 1965, is one of the finest feature film debuts of the decade, in a period when the jerky motions that crossed the surface of Italian cinema brought to the surface new major talents such as Bernardo Bertolucci and Marco Bellocchio.

In the director's own words, the movie was "the analysis of a marital relationship based entirely on a psychoanalytic fabric of a Freudian type."[4] To tell the story of a female neurosis, which calls into question an entire society that suffocates the dreams and needs—primarily sexual—of the protagonist, Spinola opted for a complex flashback structure. *La fuga* starts from the deceased Piera's (Giovanna Ralli) diary, found by her husband after the woman killed herself in a car accident, and from the notes of the psychoanalyst (Enrico Maria Salerno) to whom the wealthy woman had turned in the hope of finding a meaning to her unhappy life, plagued by a marriage without passion, a maternity accepted more through convention than conviction, a dominating and all too sexually exuberant mother. Piera has only two ways out: on the one hand, her recurring dreams in which she casts her neurosis; on the other, her friendship with Luisa (Anouk Aimée), all too sympathetic and affectionate: in fact, the woman is in love with her, something which Piera does not seem to notice (but is that really so…?), if not on the face of evidence. A mosaic which does not offer any other solution but, as film critic Giovanni Grazzini wrote, "a painful contemplation of man's fatal destiny."[5]

Launched as "*il primo film scientipsicanalitico*" (the first scienti-psychoanalytic film),[6] *La fuga* denotes an unusual attention to the matter: Spinola and Sergio Amidei wrote the movie with the collaboration of Piero Bellanova, the author (together with Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Luigi Scrivo) of the Futurist "*Manifesto del romanzo sintetico*" (Manifesto of the Synthetic Novel) published in 1939, and one of the founders of Italian psychoanalysis. To appreciate Spinola's care and sensibility, one can compare the dream sequences in *La fuga*—bright, overexposed, vaguely Fellini-esque—with the heavy-handed symbolism of so many pictures of the era, such as *Et mourir de plaisir* (1960, Roger Vadim), with its oh-so-stylish banalities beautifully photographed by Claude Renoir. Whereas Spinola scattered the movie with keys for the viewer to penetrate the

story and Piera's mind, starting with the abstract patterns that she creates for her mother's fabrics, and which, under the opening credits, turn into menacing hints of a tormented unconscious.

Everything would perhaps remain only an intellectualistic exercise, were it not for the film's extraordinary visual style. The form is surprisingly elegant, with complex long takes: an especially memorable moment features a 360-degree exterior panning shot at night, on the Mount Argentario, which ends before the window of a night club, with the silence of the night suddenly broken by the eruption of lights, music and people. The collaborators are all top-notch (the art direction and costumes are by Piero Gherardi, the photography by Marcello Gatti, the editing by Nino Baragli, the music score by Piero Piccioni), and Spinola employs the refined visual and sound style in order to better underline the difference between the glowing world where Piera lives and the existential abyss that awaits her beneath the façade of luxury and wealth.

The critics, as expected, responded to the film with an overt cautiousness. Of course, the theme recalled Antonioni's works, and the scenes shot in the thermonuclear plant in Latina recalled *Deserto rosso* (a.k.a. *Red Desert*, 1964), Some even joked: "The movie will probably please those who dislocated their jaws yawning before Monica Vitti and her croaking, hydrocarbons-obsessed husband."[7] But the visual analogies with *Deserto rosso* were merely coincidental: the two films came out at a very short distance from each other. the similarities with Antonioni's cinema—namely, the observation of a modernity both fascinating and alienating, which deludes us into controlling the world but is not able to cage out neuroses—never leads to emulation. On the other hand, the narrative made of ellipses, delays, hesitations, reveals an attentive look to the characters that never yields to stereotypes.

What is more, Spinola ventured into muddy waters, by dealing with the theme of female homosexuality, at a time when it was above all a hook to lure filmgoers, as in the Italian Gothic horror films of the period; but despite the censors giving the movie a V.M.18 rating for its "morbid and sexual situations, particularly evident in the description of abnormal sexual tendencies of some female characters," there is no complacency at all on the part of the director in the description of the character played by Anouk Aimée and her attempts at seducing Piera.

Among the Spinola ancestry there was also Simonetta Cattaneo Vespucci, the muse of painter Sandro Botticelli and the model for his painting *Nascita di Venere*. The director found his own muse in Giovanna Ralli, whom he had met on the set of Franciolini's *Villa Borghese* (1953). Until then, the beautiful Roman actress was typecast in proletarian roles (as in *Era notte a Roma*, 1960, by Roberto Rossellini); here, she finally emerges from the waters of Italian cinema like Botticelli's Venus, with one of the most touching female portrayals of the decade, that rewarded her with a Silver Ribbon for Best Actress. The attention to the feminine would be a constant in Spinola's *oeuvre*.

## *A Woman Steals*

*La fuga* was acquired for foreign distribution by Fox: it was distributed in France, West Germany, Mexico and the United States, where it premiered in New York, in

March 1966, in a subtitled version, as *The Escape*. The critics were not particularly impressed: the *New York Times* reviewer judged the flashback-within-flashback structure too intricate, and dismissed the narrative as slow and tedious, even though he praised the handsomely photographed scenes.[8] Joseph Gelmis, in *Newsday*, was even harsher, writing that Spinola's film "had retained … the oblique style, aimless boredom and actionless plot of Antonioni" together with "the sensational, pretentious and endless clinical psychoanalyzing of the American movies," in a review that, if anything, showed the critic's lack of feeling for the director of *L'Avventura*.[9] On the other hand, *The Boston Globe*'s George McKinnon praised the lack of sensationalism and the taste in handling the subject, although the flashback structure left him cold.[10]

Meanwhile, the director was busy working on his second feature film: in an early article dated late 1964 it was described as "the story of a teenage girl who, more or less unconsciously, steals her mother's lover,"[11] and the tentative cast featured Anouk Aimée, Massimo Franciosa and the young Patricia Gozzi—a meteor of French cinema in the early 1960s, best-known especially for her role in *Les dimanches de Ville d'Avray* (a.k.a. *Sundays and Cybele*, 1962, Serge Bourguignon)—as the Lolita type. Spinola managed to finally shoot it only two years later, in June 1966; in the meantime, he helmed an amusing short film, *Vita da gatto* (A Cat's Life), on the conditions of stray cats in Rome. By then the cast had radically changed. The movie, called *L'estate* (The Summer), starred Enrico Maria Salerno, Nadja Tiller, and a sixteen-year-old girl who had just won the "Miss Teenager Italiana" contest at Rome's most notorious nightclub, the Piper Club: Patrizia Vistarini, also known as Mita Medici. "I came across a young girl at the Piper … who certainly could not act, she had never done anything in the movies, but had her own weight … she had something … she had no technique, but you looked at her, and that was enough…."[12] The screenplay is credited to Spinola and the Spanish scriptwriter Rafael Azcona, but the director revealed: "I wrote the script with Marco Ferreri. Actually, I had concocted a previous one with [Sergio] Amidei, very bad indeed … or rather, it was beautiful from a spectacular point of view, but it was not what I wanted to do with the story."[13] The film was released in late November 1966, with a V.M.18 rating: despite Spinola's objections, the board of censors judged the story too scabrous, and pointed out the "many daring lines of dialogue." Box-office takings were 408 million *lire*, over twice as much as *La fuga* (183 million *lire*).

Set in Sardinia, between the towns of Olbia and Porto Rotondo, on the yacht of industrialist Sergio Boldrini (Salerno), during a four-day holiday where the man and his lover Adriana (Tiller) are joined by the latter's daughter Elisa (Medici), *L'estate* is much more than what the bare synopsis might suggest. The critics correctly pointed out Alberto Moravia's 1929 novel *Gli indifferenti* as its immediate literary model, and certainly the memory of *Lolita* also emerges here and there. But Spinola added the context, which is the key to read the movie properly: a rampant capitalism, no longer tied to the industry ("You see, actually I do not fabricate a product, I move money," Boldrini explains). Similarly, the tale of the seduction game perpetrated by the 16-year-old Elisa at the expense of her stepfather is characterized by an accurate sociological and psychological fabric.

Sergio Boldrini is yet another specimen of Italian middle-aged male, gripped by the fear of growing old, the kind of characterizations in which a few years before Dino

Risi excelled (see *Il sorpasso*, 1962, starring Vittorio Gassman), and which in his more recent films sounded artificial or out of tune (see *Il tigre*, 1967, starring Gassman and Ann-Margret). Sergio arrives in Sardinia with bellicose intentions—a healthy life regime, wake up at 5 in the morning, going fishing every day—but ends up getting bored as always at dinner parties with friends who have moored their yachts in the area, all sitting in a circle with a whisky in hand, gossiping about this and that and discussing financial investments. He is not married, but it is as if he were, he who hates long-term investments ("Do you know what an economist wrote? In the long run, we will all be dead"), and the loss of desire toward his still attractive partner seems unquenchable; the scene where Adriana, trying to make peace after an argument, persuades him to come downstairs in their cabin for "a nap," and what ensues, is a moment of ordinary marital misery that leaves its mark. It is at this point that the jaunty and calculator Elisa comes into the play: the boat trip with her stepfather, where she hurts her foot with a sea urchin, is a forerunner of the seduction, and the scene where Sergio sucks passionately the girl's injured foot ("If blood doesn't come out there can be an infection," he explains) is worthy of an ideal anthology of lolitism in the movies.

However, compared with so many Italian movies on similar themes, such as *La voglia matta* (a.k.a. *Crazy Desire*, 1962, Luciano Salce), *L'estate* is not focused on the intoxicating charm of a seductive teen, nor does Spinola aim at the portrait of the average Italian awkward womanizer. The way Sergio is caught in the girl's net has something inevitable to it, and he embraces his destiny passively, like a man condemned to the gallows. The affair is consumed clandestinely, in the afternoon, in a small, half-empty hotel in Olbia: Sergio, hiding behind a pair of shades, asks for two separate rooms for himself and his stepdaughter, but admits he has no luggage. It is a humiliating moment worthy of Nabokov, whereas the sexual act is only alluded to via an ellipsis. What is more, Elisa's seduction is not aimed at the loss of virginity, seen as a burden to get rid of (as it was in Alberto Lattuada's *Dolci inganni*, a.k.a. *Sweet Deceptions*, 1960), but, in another nod to Moravia's novel, it has an economic motive: the fear that her wealthy stepfather abandons her mother, forcing both to give up the high standard of living to which they are accustomed, the yacht, the pricey Swiss boarding school.... When Elisa openly tells her what happened, Adriana objects incredulously: "There are things that matter more than money!" to which her offspring cynically replies: "Of course, the things you buy with money...."

Watching the film, one realizes what Spinola meant when speaking of his doubts about the early draft of the script. "Amidei knew that something had to be dramatized, and did not care whether the result would be believable.... Maybe he was right, but maybe he stuck to an old way of looking at things.... So, the first version of the script for *L'estate* was bad because it was entirely built on the canons of spectacle.... But I think that in modern cinema spectacle must rise from the observation of reality. Conflicts should not be dramatized and emphasized, but must come out naturally."[14] In fact, the Genoese director is as careful to circumvent the typical paraphernalia of the *commedia all'italiana*, as he is clever enough to avoid the temptation of tragedy and the pitfalls of romanticism. Eventually Adriana attempts suicide, but only perfunctorily, more to save appearances than out of true desperation; then she surrenders to the inevitable, and in order not to remain alone she accepts the *fait accompli*, giving way

to her daughter as the new concubine. No dramas, just a hypocritical make-believe for the outside world, and come what may below the deck. "I am not a moralist, not a sociologist," Spinola pointed out, "and I do not make judgments…. I think it's useless to try and determine what is good and bad in today's world, to bury our heads and condemn or absolve according to a traditional moral code that has obviously aged."[15]

Once again, the setting is fundamental: Sardinia's Costa Smeralda, already victim of a no-holds barred housing development and prey to reckless speculators (as in *Il successo*, 1963, by Mauro Morassi and Dino Risi), depicted with memorable touches, such as the party on the yacht where, much to the jealous Sergio's chagrin, Elisa flirts with none other than Gordon Mitchell, as himself, in a moment worthy of Fellini's *La dolce vita*. "He is an American actor, he just finished shooting *3 colpi di Winchester*[16]…," she explains. "Yes, I understand, it must be one of those committed, educational films…" is Boldrini's piqued answer.

As deeply rooted as it is in its time, *L'estate* benefits also from a stunning soundtrack assembled by Gianni Boncompagni, which includes the most popular Beat singles of the period, by the likes of The Pipers, The Rokes, The Motowns, Mike Liddell e gli Atomi, which gives an idea of the lightheartedness that characterized the mid–1960s, a period in which popular culture was blooming with the excitement and novelties brought by the new generations born after the end of World War II. The summer of the title is, metaphorically, Adriana's, which is now drawing to a close while Elisa's spring begins. But the final shot of the yacht that sets sail for new shores is to some extent also the allegory of the direction taken by Italian cinema: after touching more and more daring topics, it had now finally set off in the vast sea of eroticism.

## *A Woman Disappears*

In June 1969, a bunch of movies were seized by the magistrates for alleged obscenity: within the course of one week, in Rome only, four films were withdrawn from theaters, namely *Satyricon* (1969, Gian Luigi Polidoro), *Inghilterra nuda* (1969, Vittorio De Sisti), *Confessioni intime di tre giovani spose* (*Das Wunder der Liebe*, 1968, Franz Josef Gottlieb) and *Io sono curiosa* (*Jag är nyfiken—en film i gult*, 1967, Vilgot Sjöman). Italy's best-selling newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, hosted a debate on the "boom of pornography," and Spinola was one of the guests, together with producer Alfredo Bini (who had financed *Satyricon*, an attempt to cash in on Federico Fellini's forthcoming *Fellini—Satyricon* starring Don Backy and Tina Aumont), actress Luisa Rivelli, and several university students.[17] The discussion focused on the meaning of the "common sense of decency"—the requisite, according to the Penal Code, for the crime of obscenity—and Spinola proved to be the more libertarian among the participants, without prejudices or moralism ("A "sexy" movie stimulates, in various ways, young people, couples, elderly people? Well, then it is useful," he claimed) and armed with good sense, whereas the students came out as singularly narrow-minded. When one of them claimed that the absence of censorship would lead to anarchy, the director replied: "Nobody forces you to go and see this or that movie!" Another student objected that "Erotomaniacs are attracted by "sexy" films and therefore these are likely to aggravate their disorders," and

that "many erotic films are ends in themselves," to which Spinola replied: "Beauty and ugliness are not only in the movies. And then, why should nudity exclude art?" However, according to the newspaper, "the reasons of the defenders of the erotic film do not convince the students." And not even the censors, as the fate of Spinola's next film would prove.

Certifying the affinities between his films and the work of Alberto Moravia, for his third feature film the director chose to adapt a short story by the Roman novelist, published some time earlier in the *Corriere della Sera*.[18] *Donna invisibile* was a brief tale in which the end of a love story becomes the metaphorical blindness of a husband who does not "see" his wife any more: she has become invisible to him. In adapting the story, Spinola (who collaborated with Dacia Maraini and Ottavio Jemma) developed into images Moravia's intuition, in the most literal way: in the opening scene, Laura (Giovanna Ralli) appears in front of her husband, Andrea (Silvano Tranquilli), wearing only bra and panties, and the man's eyes look through her, noting a humidity spot on the wall. Laura's body, in that moment, is literally transparent.

Spinola's disregard of the ridiculous is blatant, but these were also times when Italian cinema could play on the edge of metaphors and symbols, courting (and touching) the Fantastic with admirable fluency, bringing Antonioni's discourse on incommunicability to a point of no return. The audience shares Andrea's "blindness" through Laura, who sees herself through the eyes of her husband; therefore, while she tries to make love with him she imagines herself replaced by the young Delfina (Carla Gravina). But

**Paolo Spinola (center) directing Carla Gravina on the set of *La donna invisibile* (1969) (courtesy Massimiliana Spinola).**

who is, in fact, the enigmatic Delfina—in Moravia's story she is called Gilberta, and is her husband's seventeen-year-old niece—who lives with the protagonists, shares their social and intimate life, behaves like a mirror image of Laura, and seems intent on seducing both her and Andrea in an ambiguous *ménage à trois*? Does she really exist, or is she the product of Laura's imagination, the materialization of her fear of no longer feeling desired, the younger and more desirable half by whom Laura feels threatened and in turn dreams to dispatch?

This intriguing re-reading of the *doppelgänger*—a common theme to other films of the period, from *Partner* (1968, Bernardo Bertolucci) to *Un tranquillo posto di campagna* (a.k.a. *A Quiet Place in the Country*, 1968, Elio Petri)—is the most original part of the film, which develops the few scenes sketched in Moravia's story (the beginning, Gilberta's presence, the hunting party) and finds an autonomous interpretation to it.

That said, *La donna invisibile* remains a work of its time, with didactic excesses and some awkward passages, especially when Spinola leaves the protagonists aside and tries to depict the social environment that surrounds them. A case in point is the character of a student protester, who claims that "The professors … are full of shit!" and plays darts with a picture of Lyndon Johnson ("Christ, I always forget…." "About what?" "Buying Nixon's portrait!") but lives in the bourgeois comfort he professes to despise.

Compared with *L'estate*, the film's social analysis is less felicitous. "Such a modern story is not possible without a very realistic context," Spinola explained. "I think that the audience likes the stories about kings and queens." And yet, his wealthy upper-class characters, complete with a villa and servants, who attend the Opera premieres at the Scala in Milan regardless of protesters, make trips to luxurious Swiss clinics to have abortions (at a time when it was illegal in Italy), and spend their time in lavish Christmas celebrations and hunting parties, remain rather opaque figures. A sequence where the bored protagonists try to revive a dull after-party by imagining for themselves parallel lives, complete with secret liaisons and hidden vices, seems already a cliché, since similar situations had become a common occurrence, and more convincingly developed, in many films of that period (such as *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*). Still, Spinola shows his directorial prowess, by orchestrating an intriguing game between Ralli and Gravina, with the latter repeating the former's gestures as in a mirror—a scene climaxing in a lesbian kiss, which the censors did not like at all.

Despite the clumsiness of certain parts, if one accepts the challenge and lets Ennio Morricone's beautiful score (featuring the voice of Edda Dell'Orso) conduct the game, *La donna invisibile* reserves some priceless moments. One such is the scene where, upon returning late at night at the villa after a Christmas party, Laura, Andrea and Delfina take refuge in their villa's kitchen where, presumably, they had never even set foot before, to make a cup of tea. Laura feels sick and dizzy, Delfina and Andrea make her lie on the table and start undressing her. The man brandishes a knife and opens her bra with it, takes her stockings off, starts kissing her feet. What is happening? Is it the harbinger of a threesome seduction scene, of a murder, or simply another of Laura's feverish dreams?

*La donna invisibile* is yet another full-fledged female portrait, and a very stylish one indeed, thanks to a director who is good at directing actors and actresses, who knows how to move the characters within the shot, and who is able to build a whole sequence entirely on a game of looks that chase, cross and spy on each other from a

**Left to right: Silvano Tranquilli, Paolo Spinola, Giovanna Ralli and Carla Gravina on the set of *La donna invisibile* (courtesy Massimiliana Spinola).**

car's rear view mirrors. The film climaxes in one of the best and most refined endings of the era, with a hunting party which brings to mind Jean Renoir's *La regle du jeu* (1939) and ends with an expected yet ambivalent coda, for the way Spinola solves the story's ambiguity; without giving too much away, it is a wonderfully filmed scene, with a plethora of visual flourishes and focus/out of focus tricks, interspersed with a slow zoom in on Laura's face as she finally becomes aware of Delfina's role in the story. The result is truly unforgettable.

Spinola's film ends in a way similar to the beginning of another ambitious and controversial work, Eriprando Visconti's *Una spirale di nebbia*; but the latter came out in 1978, at a time when Italian cinema was already affected by market choices, and those filmmakers who dreamed to be *auteurs* had already given up to the logic of compromise and the need for full frontal nudity to make their films marketable. For his part, Spinola still attempted to talk to a general audience as well as to the more refined moviegoers, by mediating authorship and tasteful eroticism; he courted the bourgeois public that came attracted by Moravia's name, but did not forget about those who merely cared about something else—that is, bare female flesh, elegantly offered, courtesy of Giovanna Ralli, Carla Gravina and Anita Sanders. The latter, already seen in *La fuga*, was a meteor of Italian post–68 cinema, halfway between commitment and nudity, from Tinto Brass' *Nerosubianco* (1969) to *Thomas ... gli indemoniati* (1970, Pupi Avati), from Sergio Citti's debut *Ostia* (1970) to *La coppia* (1973), the only film directed by the eminent literary critic Enzo Siciliano.

Nudity, that was the question. Invisible to her husband, Spinola's woman was not quite so for the censors, who decreed that the flesh on display was far too much. Predictably, the censorship committee demanded some cuts here and there (the sight of female buttocks, and male ones too; the aforementioned kiss between Laura and Delfina; the erotic "society game"), and *La donna invisibile* came out, in the hot summer of 1969, with the expected V.M.18 rating. It was immediately seized by the magistrate, with the accusation of obscenity: the producer, Silvio Clementelli, was asked to perform further cuts on the film for a total of about 20 minutes. "War to porn films," announced the *Corriere d'Informazione*, reporting a new wave of seizures all over the country: other victims were *Femina ridens* (a.k.a. *The Frightened Woman*, 1969, Piero Schivazappa) and *Una sull'altra* (a.k.a. *Perversion Story*, 1969, Lucio Fulci). Given the greater liberality on the part of the rating board in granting screening certificates, increasingly zealous magistrates intervened to prevent the general public from seeing allegedly "obscene" films. Spinola was understandably disappointed. "The cuts that have been demanded now would end up distorting the essence and consistency of the film. And this is particularly serious. Also because, in my opinion, movies should never be seized. Cinema is not coercive as military service.... At eighteen a man does military service, he gets a job, perhaps he will vote.... At eighteen he can as well decide, then, the kind of movies he wants to see."[19]

*La donna invisibile* was released from seizure two months later, and the court of Rome praised its "extremely high artistic value," but it grossed only 280 million *lire*: a little less than, say, *Nel labirinto del sesso* (a.k.a. *The Labyrinth of Sex*), Alfonso Brescia's pseudo-documentary featuring psychoanalyst Emilio Servadio, who illustrates several clinical cases of sexual deviations. These were the shores toward which the audience was sailing.

## *A Woman Protests*

Meanwhile, Spinola had a hard time trying to set up a new project. In 1969, he announced a new picture starring Ralli, "a story of feelings, very humane and suspenseful," titled *Indagine personale*[20]; and in October 1971 there were rumors of his return behind the camera for a love story set in the underworld. But it all ended in nothing. Newspapers reported that he was busy working in his winery in Gavi, in Piedmont, and he explained: "It can happen to everyone not to have ideas, and rather than accept movies I don't like, and I have been offered many, I have decided to put myself on the sidelines. Anyway, it's the only choice for those who don't want to make routine movies, for those who, like me, try to grasp reality as it changes."[21]

Eight years would pass before Spinola got to work on another picture. The idea for *Un giorno alla fine di ottobre* (1977) actually dated back to 1967 and came from the introductory line of Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* ("I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked...."), which gave the director the pretext to think back to that changing reality that his cinema attempted to fix on film, here in the form of a sometimes semi-documentaristic work, all shot with a hand-held camera, stalking the characters across the streets of Milan and its suburbs. No famous names,

this time, but a couple of young actors: Pierluigi Conti, a.k.a. Al Cliver, had starred in the curious drama *Il saprofita* (1974, Sergio Nasca), in *Ondata di calore* (a.k.a. *Wave of Lust*, 1976, Ruggero Deodato) and in Fernando di Leo's *I padroni della città* (a.k.a. *Mr. Scarface*, 1976); Annie Brillard, better known as Annie Belle, had started in France, had appeared in Jean Rollin's *Bacchanales sexuelles* (1974) and *Lévres de sang* (1975), but she had become a sexy starlet in Italy after appearing in a trio of erotic/exotic films in which she sported close-cropped platinum blonde hair and a breathtaking adolescential body: Massimo Dallamano's *La fine dell'innocenza* (a.k.a. *Teenage Emanuelle*, 1976), Rondi's *Velluto nero*, and *Laure*, all alongside Cliver, then her partner in real life.[22]

The French actress later recalled the role with pleasure, and claimed that *Un giorno alla fine di ottobre* was the only movie she had done that she was satisfied with.

> I won the San Valentino prize for it. Truly a beautiful film, with a true-sounding story that concerned us all very closely, since we were young and 1968 was still vivid in our minds. It was a very good story, about a rebellious young girl from a middle-class family who refused her social status. Then one day she met this man … and they had a clash. Because she threw in his face the fact of him being a bourgeois … then they fell in love. It was great making that film, because I felt that part so close to me … for the first time I managed to come out of my cliché. I was not the usual sexy starlet anymore. Someone even wrote that I was the new BB, but I didn't care being "the new etc." I was Annie and I just wanted to be an actress.[23]

*Un giorno alla fine di ottobre* follows the day of an official at the Montedison firm (Cliver), who falls prey to a sudden and irrepressible discomfort, leaves the office and wanders aimlessly around the city. He watches the clashes between the police and the protesters, visits a painter friend, meets a student protester (Belle) whose subversive brother is in jail, and who lectures him on the necessity of class struggle. The two, inevitably, end up in bed, in a squalid hotel. Less obviously, at the end it is the young woman who, despite her rebellious appearance, remains attached to the bourgeois certainties and comforts, whereas the man's dissatisfaction leads him to an impromptu gesture of rebellion against the authorities that has tragic consequences.

The intentions were laudable; the result, in spite of the collaboration to the script by the renowned novelist Carlo Castellaneta, often bogs down in a heavy-going didacticism, with dialogue packed with rhetoric and walking clichés. Annie Belle's character is a filiation of the student protester seen in *La donna invisibile*, and Cliver's wooden acting gives an idea of why the mordant Lucio Fulci had chosen for him the nickname "Tufus." "It is a slightly updated version of the films made in the early 1960s by Eriprando Visconti and Anna Gobbi. Or, better yet, the movies that were *not* made at that time," wrote film critic Callisto Cosulich. Yet, in this undoubtedly flawed film, as confused as its protagonist, there is something to be saved: the autumnal languor of the images, the search for original visual solutions to ordinary film situations, the ability to grasp an increasingly widespread malaise, born out of the loss of ideals and reference points.

Although originally conceived as a meditation on 1968, *Un giorno alla fine di ottobre* ended up speaking of the Movement of 1977, and what was happening in Milan in that period. The scene where a couple is attacked by a bunch of Neo-Fascists brings to mind Carlo Lizzani's *San Babila ore 20: un delitto inutile* (a.k.a. *San Babila—8 p.m.*, 1976), while the cameo of painter Filippo Panseca, shortly thereafter one of the pioneers of computer art, touches the theme of the commodification of art, also discussed (with

totally different filmic tools) in Alberto Cavallone's *Blue Movie*. Too little to keep afloat a film which gropes in search of an audience that has already disappeared: *Un giorno alla fine di ottobre* flopped badly at the box office, and Spinola's fourth film remained his swan song.

"To make movies, what's important is to have stories to tell," the director observed in an interview published in 1984, when his career as a filmmaker had already finished, and the crisis of Italian cinema was getting more dramatic every day. "The trouble today is that the costs are too high … a painter, or a writer, they use their canvas or paper, they make a painting or a novel and then can sell it or not, whereas you must sell a movie in advance…." He summed it up, prophetically: "To be honest, nowadays I would not be willing to invest money in movies."[24]

*Potius mori quam foedari*, recites the Spinola family Latin motto: rather die than be defiled. Paolo Spinola contaminated himself with commercial cinema as little as possible, only when it was inevitable; and when it came to choosing between sailing to ordinary routes or staying on the shore once and for all, he opted for an artistic death, retreating into silence from a dry sea which he did not feel like his own anymore, and whose stench had already begun to spread everywhere.

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## Paolo Spinola—Essential Filmography

1957 *Agguato a Tangeri* (SC)
1965 *La fuga* (D, S, SC)
1966 *L'estate* (D, S, SC)
1969 *La donna invisibile* (D, SC)
1977 *Un giorno alla fine di ottobre* (D, S, SC)

# 7

# Augusto Tretti—The Don Quixote of Italian Cinema

With only three feature films (*La legge della tromba*, 1962; *Il potere*, 1971; *Alcool*, 1980) and a featurette (*Mediatori e carrozze*, 1985) in a career spanning a quarter of a century, Augusto Tretti's output might be considered marginal if not utterly negligible in the history of Italian cinema. Nevertheless, this self-taught filmmaker brought an anomalous, original vision to an industry that was living its golden age, with world-renowned *auteurs* making their most acclaimed masterpieces. He broke the rules (formal, productive, narrative ones) because he simply ignored them, and made a kind of cinema that was definitely unique and truly his own.

Still today, Tretti's minuscule body of work is unclassifiable, if not by contrast, that is to say, as a conscious, radical contraposition to the mainstream commercial production, and a violent protest against its style and form. His output was so free and anarchic that it did not have any disciples, although traces of it can be found here and there: for instance, in the works of Daniele Ciprì and Franco Maresco, with their surreal, zero-budgeted shorts, broadcast on television as *Cinico TV* and their controversial feature films, *Lo zio di Brooklyn* (1995), *Totò che visse due volte* (1998) and *Il ritorno di Cagliostro* (2003). But these are only approximations: as film historian Emiliano Morreale noted,

> Tretti is irreducible to any tendency of Italian cinema. In his, so to speak, conscious *naïveté* there is perhaps something of Cesare Zavattini and of the far anarchism of certain Chaplin or René Clair films, but especially the lesson of Bertolt Brecht. In his works there is a project almost of film-essay and at the same time a rediscovery of cinema as if it was being made for the very first time, with a pioneering, amateurish spirit. His work is apparently close to pamphlet, but in fact it is free from the ideological dross due to its language loopiness.[1]

Tretti seemed to take nothing seriously, except for the grotesque aspects of life; and yet his cinema, underneath its formal slapdashness, has a serious core which allows it to focus on life's big issues in a mordant, original way. His niece, TV journalist Daria Bignardi, said that he "had the pure and brilliant eye of artists and children, and he often saw things more clearly than others."[2] As for Tretti, once he called himself "the Don Quixote of Italian cinema."[3] He was right.

## *Reinventing the Wheel: The Beginnings*

Born in 1924, Augusto Tretti was raised in a wealthy Venetian family near Verona. An anti-fascist and an anti-militarist, he received the call-up in summer 1943: after a few days he deserted, while Italy signed the armistice with the Allies, and he joined the partisans. After the war Augusto enrolled into Law school but dropped out, intolerant to the rules and willing to follow his dream. Instead of being a lawyer, he wanted to be a filmmaker. "Exams and the university world exasperated me. I was almost always on the edge of neurosis. Then I happened upon a camera, little more than a toy. So, just for fun, I started filming brief views, details and oddities of what was around me."[4]

And so Tretti started making short films, 3 or 4 minutes each. But they didn't look like the kind of films that were made at that time. Actually, they didn't look like *anything else*. Partly, this was because the young aspiring filmmaker had literally started from scratch, technically speaking. "If someone had told me "You'll make movies," I'd replied that it would have been easier to go to the moon," he confessed. "I didn't know anything about cinema, didn't know what the frames, the camera, the editing were."[5]

But it was not just that. Tretti's idea of film was quite bizarre to say the least, and his free approach showed in each and every frame, starting with the choice of actors. His main accomplice and victim was the family cook, an octagenarian stout woman with a big nose who had been his nanny, named Maria Boto, who became the protagonist of almost all his early films, often disguised in heavy make-up. Augusto also cast non-professional actors, friends and acquaintances, sometimes even local prostitutes when they fit the role, and let his free, idiosyncratic spirit loose.

Some shorts were spoofs of the *Settimana Incom* newsreel, and poked fun at the latter's pompous tone, showing the director's mordant view of the official propaganda. Others were even more surreal in tone. This was the case with a short film about Creation, *La creazione del mondo*: Eve was played by a local girl of easy virtue who had no trouble appearing in the nude, and Augusto turned the Biblical tale into a satirical allegory of present times, by way of a brilliant gimmick. "I took the first poster I found on the street … and it was '*Vota Libertas*' [Author's note: "Vote Libertas," an election poster for the Catholic party Democrazia Cristiana]. It had flown away with the wind. I picked it up and took it away.… I put that '*Vota Libertas*' behind the Lord's back. After creating Adam and Eve, and banishing them from Eden, God turned back and you could read, '*Vota Libertas*'…."[6]

The few acquaintances who watched Tretti's films liked them very much, and one viewer asked the prestigious film critic Filippo Sacchi to have a look at this weird self-taught filmmaker. Sacchi was impressed, and suggested that Tretti make the big leap and move to Rome. Those were the early 1950s, and Rome was the capital of European cinema. It was easy for an aspiring filmmaker to get started in the movie business, and Tretti was luckier than others: Federico Fellini took him as second assistant for *Il bidone* (1955). The experience, if anything, convinced Augusto that he would never be at ease in the wild world of the Roman film production business. He returned to his hometown and patiently worked on his first feature film.

Originally to be titled *Celestino*, after the name of the protagonist, and then *Celestino pane e acqua* (a pun on the famous Spanish film *Marcelino pan y vino*, directed

by Ladislao Vajda in 1958), it germinated from a 38-minute film called *Malavita*, presumably shot in the mid-to-late 1950s, which featured some of the same actors, characters and situations. The black-and-white "grotesque semi-sound short film" has survived but is unfortunately lacking the soundtrack.

Tretti later claimed that he had somehow tricked the producers, into making them believe they were making an ordinary comedy, but the truth seems to be different. *Celestino* started production in 1958, based on an original script by Tretti and three other associates, including the noted humorist Carlo Manzoni, and to be produced by Tretti's mother and a Milan-based company, Slogan Film, owned by co-scriptwriters Pino Donizetti and Giuseppe Tortorella. Soon it turned out that Donizetti and Tortorella were milking Tretti's mother's finances, demanding for more and more money and counting on her naivety and good faith, to the point that the unsuspecting woman sold plots of land to pay for expenses which were totally made up by the co-producers: for instance, they demanded payment for a soundstage in Turin where several scenes had allegedly been filmed, but where actually no one ever set foot. The dispute reached the courts, but eventually Tretti renounced it, out of fear of not being able to finish his film, which by then had changed its title into *La legge della tromba*, and he became the only producer. After an ordeal of over a year and a half, he finally completed the film in 1960.

## *"It's the system that doesn't work!"*

*La legge della tromba* is a unique film in many ways, starting with its protagonist. In a stunt worthy of Robert Hamer's *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), Tretti cast his beloved Maria Boto in no less than *four* roles—all of them male. "I liked that woman as a type: she has an extraordinary face, in my opinion. Watching that face, I felt the desire to create characters out of it, and so I made her play four characters, in make-up.... She succeeded very well, much better than a man, even better than if I had cast Gassman."[7]

Boto appears as herself in the prologue, set in the kitchen of Tretti's villa, addressing the camera while cooking. Behind her, a large pot is boiling on a fireplace. Her opening monologue, which deserves to be reported in its entirety, is nothing short of a declaration of poetry on the part of the director as well as a reference to Tretti's misadventures with the producers:

> Ladies and gentlemen, I am Maria Boto, profession: cook. I have never seen a movie in all my life. I'm not familiar with them. Despite this, they have begged me to work in the movies. I accepted and went to a movie set. I saw the spotlights, the camera, the parallax, the actors, the cameraman, the electricians, the arc lights. Very interesting things, but too much confusion. And then, lots of trouble. Let me tell you one: while we were filming, they halted the movie, the producers didn't want to give any more money because they said I was not commercial [laughs]. I worked hard, but I'm also glad I had this experience. And now, dear ladies and gentlemen, I bid you goodbye, because I have to cook lunch.

Then the opening credits roll, hand-written on white paper sheet and preceded by an unforgettable, self-ironic stab: the production company is "Boto Films," and its logo is a blatant parody of the MGM one, with a circular hole in the middle; there, the

toothless Maria Boto, in place of the lion, roars three times. In just a couple of minutes, we are deep into Augusto Tretti's universe.

*La legge della tromba* tells the story of "five poor devils," led by Celestino (played by avant-garde composer, and Tretti's personal friend, Angelo Paccagnini), who attempt "the most audacious of robberies," as the opening caption announces. The hit, a robbery on a bank van, goes terribly wrong, as the makeshift gangsters find out that the loot is a bunch of valueless promissory notes; they are arrested by a mustached guard (Boto) and incarcerated. Their life in prison looks like something out of a children's comic book: they wear striped pajama suits, eat spaghetti, and carry a big black ball and chain. One day they find a rasp in a loaf of bread and escape … just minutes before the governor proclaims an amnesty. In the countryside, Celestino and his friends end up at a site where military maneuvers are taking place, led by a general (Boto) on a sidecar: their unwilling participation turns the maneuvers into a farce. Determined to go straight, Celestino convinces his accomplices to get work at the newly established trumpet factory owned by his old army mate Mr. Liborio (Boto). But the entrepreneur—who reads Hans Kelsen's *Pure Theory of Law* and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*—turns out to be a capitalist shark, who exploits and underpays the workers, and who corrupts politicians in order to become the monopolist in the market: after the factory opens, a new law imposes the use of the trumpet in every possible social function. Soon the market is saturated, and Mr. Liborio thinks of moving the factory abroad, to a country (the fictitious Tartagal) where copper and zinc have miraculously merged naturally, and there exists a brass mine which would allow him to cut costs. Meanwhile Celestino has met a pretty girl, Marta, whom he wants to marry, but she happens to be the daughter of the Tartagal mine owner. So, Mr. Liborio sets out to seduce Marta and sails with her to Tartagal. Only Celestino discovers too late that the trumpet factory has been dismantled. He and his friends throw a party with some girls which the caption describes as "an orgy," although the couples are merely dancing and soon a feeling of sadness and dread ensues. The drunk Celestino engages in a fight with one of his ex-accomplices, who wounds him with a cake knife. He survives and finds a new job: test pilot of inter-

**Maria Boto, Eugenio Tretti's cook and the protagonist of his first feature film, *La legge della tromba* (1962).**

planetary rockets. The first rocket explodes just after launching, and his employer (Boto) asks Celestino, who ended atop a tree after the explosion, what was wrong. "It's the system that doesn't work," Celestino replies in the film's punchline.

As in his early newsreel spoofs, Tretti was successful in "conveying the fraud and misery ingrained in man's self-aggrandizing narratives,"[8] with a style as funny as it is bizarre. One can notice analogies with Chaplin, Tati and René Clair (particularly *À nous la liberté*, 1931), but they are merely suggestions spawned by a similar poetic vision. As film historian Luca Pallanch noted, "Tretti was born an orphan and died as such: he created his cinema on the wings of a personal passion, autonomous, immune from references and homages … the lack of means becomes style: necessity is the mother of invention, is the daily motto. There results a primordial, childlike cinema, which doesn't refer to other movies or other visions, but to a reality transfigured by the director, who truly becomes the creator of parallel universes."[9] For one thing, one of the five robbers, Bimbo (Kid) is a very tall man, and Tretti decided that his head must never be in frame. Whenever he appears, we see his figure only up to his neck. It's an amusing, cartoonish sight gag, which the producers didn't understand. "They called me in their office and said, 'You cannot keep a person's head offscreen for the whole movie … that's inhuman.' Dumb talk. So I accepted a compromise, unfortunately, rather than not being able to make the film. And I obliged: sometimes the head is outside the frame, sometimes it isn't."[10]

But the movie also displayed another peculiar quality, a study of the language and jargon displayed by the authorities—the sequence of the trumpet factory inauguration is yet another stab at the *Settimana Incom*—and their recourse to formalities and bombastic expressions to consolidate power over the masses. This way, Tretti followed a similar path to ace scriptwriters Age & Scarpelli's recreation of the working class lingo (from *I soliti ignoti*, 1958, to *Straziami ma di baci saziami*, 1968) and their invention of a pseudo-Medieval lingo (*L'armata Brancaleone*, 1965), but with a more openly political verve. The title itself is a wordplay on the term *tromba* (trumpet) and the gergal expression *trombato* (ripped off), as Celestino and his friends are repeatedly ripped off, first in their disastrous attempted robbery, then in their return to civic society and its rules, from the tyrannical working conditions imposed on them by Mr. Liborio to the way their ideals and feelings are poisoned and manipulated by the ruling class. In Tretti's vision, the capitalists are continually exploiting the poor, and forever trying new ways to do so—and they always win. After Mr. Liborio has managed to rule the market by way of corrupting the "Minister of Sounds and Noises," and trumpets are made an indispensable accessory by law, used by everyone from traffic policemen to clergymen and street sweepers, a caption reads: "*Il paese fu così definitivamente intrombato*" ("Thus the country was definitively ripped off").

*La legge della tromba* looks like a zero-budget film, starring non-professional actors, shot on a shoestring on bare sets or real locations, with homemade props cut out of cardboard. But its apparent naivety conceals a rigorous post-production stage. Tretti asked to be sided by an expert editor, and got the chance to work with the great Mario Serandrei, one of Italy's best editors. "We showed him the footage, and at the end he said 'A very risky film.' … He repeated that I should edit the film by myself, because it was too peculiar."[11]

As with the editing, the noise track turned out to be an issue: originally it was recorded by a Roman expert, with conventional sounds and noises, but it just didn't work. Tretti's vision needed a singular sound effect accompaniment, or, as Tretti himself defined then, "*auteur* noises. "Different" noises, not realistic ones, which have a relationship with the shots. A "mad movie" must have a soundtrack in style.... So I did the whole noise track of the film by myself.... I made the sound effects one by one, my own way."[12] In addition to that, the director had his actors dubbed by some renowned stage actors from the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, including Gastone Moschin and the polyedric Alighiero Noschese.

The film benefits also from an inventive avant-garde score, which employs music and assorted noises to absurdist effects (especially noteworthy in the maneuvers scene), further proof that Tretti's naivety of approach to the medium blended with refined visual and sound ideas. The score was the teamwork of Paccagnini and the director's sister Eugenia Tretti, who would marry renowned composer Giacomo Manzoni; she would also take care of the music for her brother's following works. Eugenia too played a role in the film, out of necessity: Boto, playing Mr. Liborio, had to perform a seduction scene on Celestino's fiancée Marta, and the elderly cook was so ashamed to play the scene that she claimed she would only play it on one condition—that Eugenia, whom she knew since she was a child, would play Marta.

These qualities escaped the ministerial committee of experts, who excluded *La legge della tromba* from the "obligatory screening" (one of the key economic measures introduced by the Andreotti law to support national production) due to its "amateurishness." Desperate, Tretti returned to Rome and showed his film to critics. The response was unanimously negative, but eventually Tretti got in touch with novelist Alberto Moravia, who was also the film critic for the weekly magazine *L'Espresso*. Moravia liked *La legge della tromba* a lot, and encouraged the director to show it around to some filmmakers and intellectuals.

The movie made a strong impression on this selected audience. Valerio Zurlini loved it, despite its shoestring business and its various technical and formal issues; Florestano Vancini called it the most amazing, uncommon movie he had ever seen; Cesare Zavattini applauded its verve; Michelangelo Antonioni admired its inspiration and comical verve; and Ennio Flaiano praised its innocence and craftiness: "You can, if you want, label the film as "light-hearted" and "naïve." Some do," he wrote. "But these are wrong definitions. Light-hearted and naïve people lack severity, they stop at the first tavern, have fun.... Tretti doesn't have fun, although it is difficult not to have fun watching his films."[13] Franco Fortini, the Italian translator of Bertolt Brecht's works, underlined the film's Brechtian spirit, something unseen in Italian cinema: "What might seem the film's weaknesses are actually its strong points ... the author of *La legge della tromba* jumps over our heads and over those of the spoiled audience, and finds the amazement of elementary truths. If the word 'poetry' sounds too big, choose another one."[14]

Federico Fellini was his most passionate advocate: he called Augusto Tretti "the fool Italian cinema needs"[15] and openly invited producers to put him under contract and let him shoot whatever came to his mind. Goffredo Lombardo, the head of Titanus, Italy's biggest distributor, obliged. Following Fellini's public advice, in July 1961 he picked up *La legge della tromba* for distribution; then he called Tretti in his office and asked

him if he had some other crazy ideas for a movie. The director proposed a film about power through the ages, from the Stone Age to the present, an idea he had been toying with for some time. Without even a synopsis at hand, Lombardo gave him *carte blanche* to make a movie "absolutely special and according to your own artistic criteria," on one condition: that he work outside Rome, to keep his independence.

*La legge della tromba* was released the following year, with no publicity whatsoever, in a theater in Milan, on an unsuspecting public. Tretti, who was in the audience, recalled that people got up and left during the screening, and a spectator even complained: "I have been ripped off only twice in my life: with Antonioni's *L'eclisse* and *La legge della tromba*. Now I'm going to look for this director's address in the phone book and I'll be paying him a visit."[16] The movie's theatrical run lasted only six days.

## *The Many Faces of Power*

In 1962 Tretti started working on his second feature film, *Il potere*, in and around his family villa near the Lake Garda, which he called "the poor man's little Cinecittà." In three and a half months he shot over 17,000 meters of film.[17] It looked like his sophomore work would see the light soon, but fate had it otherwise: after the commercial disaster of Robert Aldrich's *Sodom and Gomorrah* (1962) and Visconti's *Il gattopardo* (1963)—which underwent a tiring 15-month shooting and cost over 3 billion *lire*—Titanus was forced to suspend its activity as a production company, and continue merely as distributor.

Production for *Il potere* halted, while the director went around desperately, knocking on door after door, trying to find new financiers: he recovered all the filmed footage, and edited a summary of sorts, to screen to potential backers, including Vittorio Gassman, who even seemed to be on the verge to play a role in the film.[18] Meanwhile, as time passed, some actors died of old age, some locations changed. Tretti fell into a depression. At a certain point, he gave up and got back to his farm, breeding animals.[19]

Eventually, thanks to the help of Tonino Guerra and Michelangelo Antonioni, the director found a young producer named Federico Pantanella, who agreed to help him: in 1968 Tretti and Titanus terminated the contract and the director set out to finish the film with the backing of Acquarius Audiovisual, an independent company funded by Pantanella and Mario Fattori. He reshot some scenes as best he could, trying to make up for missing bits and lack of continuity, partially softened some polemic edges and redefined his targets: times had changed politically-wise as well.

*Il potere* was finally screened at the 1971 Venice Film Festival. With over eight years in the making, it became the film with the longest shooting schedule in the history of Italian cinema. It was a Pyrrhic victory: Tretti had made the movie he always wanted to make, but, at 47, his career of filmmaker was virtually over, although he did not know it. His denunciation of the mechanics of power was too explicit and harsh for the political *status quo*, and his idiosyncratic approach was nothing less than irritating at a time when Italian cinema was sailing toward totally different areas.

*Il potere* is a more complex work than *La legge della tromba*, and adopts various narrative registers: absurdist comedy, didactic drama, documentary footage. But each

and every frame of it is pure, uniquely, unadulterated Tretti. The very opening sequence, denominated "*Origini del potere*" (Origins of Power) and set in the Stone Age, is nothing short of outstanding. It takes place in what looks like a gigantic stone quarry, and it could be roughly described as a reimagining of the opening segment of Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), crossed with Pasolini's Etna sequences in *Porcile* (1969). The fact that it was shot in 1962 or 1963 only underlines the director's visionary approach. An introductory caption explains that in prehistoric age "life was very hard, food was scarce and the weather uncertain." Several cavemen (including some of Tretti's favorite non-professional actors, disguised with wigs and furs à la *The Flintstones*) are awkwardly chasing a hen, which continually manages to escape them. Eventually they capture the animal and pluck it, but a sudden storm, accompanied by bouts of lightning, scares them to death. The lightning starts a fire in the surroundings. An elderly man, who did not take part in the chase but is visibly hungry, proclaims that he is able to control the fire, and asks for a reward for his power: each day the others will bring him a hen … and sometimes a pig. The others bow down in adoration. Other quick vignettes follow, which basically repeat the same situation: the same man, now impersonating Mohamed, claims that he brings the word of Allah, and prohibits the consumption of pork; Jesus Christ, at the Last Supper, laughs with his disciples about a new prohibition that just came to him: on Friday, only eat fish. The anarchist Tretti is not afraid of blasphemy.

**Italian locandina for *Il potere* (art by Renato Ferrini).**

*Il potere* then introduces its main symbolic figures: three men wearing animal masks—a lion, a tiger, a leopard—sitting on thrones, who represent respectively military power, commercial power and agrarian power. They discuss the ongoing social and political issues and agree about the solutions, and one of them speaks with a voice that clearly recalls that of Giovanni Agnelli, the then-president of FIAT and Italy's most powerful man. These are the only scenes shot in color. Tretti later complained about the choice, presumably dictated by commercial needs.

The rest of the film is divided into four episodes, interspersed with the bits in color featuring the three masked creatures. The opening segment recreate the ancient Romans' revolt against the landholders; the insurgents are headed by the plebeian tribune Tiberius Gracchus, who proposes a law reform which would reorganize control of the public land; but the protests are suffocated by the Senate, and Tiberius is killed: his demise is compared to those of Giacomo Matteotti and Antonio Gramsci, killed or incarcerated during the Fascist regime.

The second episode is centered on the extermination of the native Americans, who

had their lands confiscated by the U.S. army and were slaughtered by the soldiers. Even though it is perhaps the film's weakest part, not least because of the awkward *mise-en-scène* of the Wild West in the Venetian countryside, the segment predates the surreal reinvention of the American epic later attempted by Marco Ferreri with *Touche pas à la femme blanche!* (a.k.a. *Don't Touch the White Woman!*, 1974), with its recreation of the Little Bighorn massacre in modern-day Paris, in a large construction excavation where the Les Halles market once was. Again, Tretti includes references to the present-day, including documentary footage of the massacres in Vietnam. When the film came out, audiences had already experienced this analogy in works such as *Soldier Blue* (1970, Ralph Nelson), which alluded to the My Lai massacre, but it is safe to say that Tretti's intuition, matured several years earlier, was originally ahead of its time.

Then, in what is its most notorious and best part, *Il potere* proceeds to examine the genesis and rise of Fascism. Despite the cheap production values and amateurish acting, Tretti's discourse is exemplary and clear in depicting the political and economic causes that led to the birth of the Fascist party: the inflation of prices after World War I, the diffused poverty, the constitution of Socialist cooperatives that would keep the prices for consumer goods low, the growing dissatisfaction of traders and landholders and their teaming up to form a new political movement, the appearance of Benito Mussolini and the March on Rome—depicted, with an exquisite bout of absurdist humor, as a funeral procession along a country road, with a handful of octagenarian hierarchs, paunchy and with rheumatic pains, who don't even know which way Rome is. Tretti himself played the Duce, wearing a huge, unrealistic rubber mask with Mussolini's features (designed by the noted sculptor Nino Gottardi), in *Il potere*'s most explicit Brechtian sequences. What might sound on paper as an unlikely, self-defying move becomes the film's strength: the grotesque deformation of Mussolini's figure, the reduction of a world-famous icon to a laughable puppet, allows the director to aim at the very core of Fascism's cult of personality, and predates Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler: A Film from Germany* (1977), which would also reinvent Hitler as a puppet or as a ventriloquist's dummy.

Similarly to *La legge della tromba*, *Il potere* ridicules the jargon and gestures of power. Tretti reprises to the letter an original speech by the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, who embraced Fascism, in order to underline its pompousness. Then, returning to his favorite mockery of official newsreels, he depicts several very well-known public occasions in which the Duce used his public image as emblem of the regime's power, such as when helping with the harvest, bare-chested, swimming in the sea, or visiting the Pontine marshes which he would drain ("We won the war against the flies, now we'll break the mosquitoes' back!" he proclaims, in a satirical paraphrasing of the Duce's war speech against Greece in 1940).

The most satirical bit, which also draws from historical facts, is a Fascist parade where the same soldiers are marching all over again, and every time they must change their hat or uniform in order to make it look as if they are many more in front of the authorities and crowds. It climaxes in an absurdist gag with the soldiers building fake tanks out of bikes and sheets of tin—all this celebrated by a roaring crowd and grandiose discourses on the part of the hierarchs. The score (by Eugenia Manzoni Tretti, who also played Gabriele D'Annunzio's muse Eleonora Duse in a brief, amusing sequence)

proceeds accordingly, parodying Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, and the director uses various sound effects as grotesque counterpoint to the images. For instance, during an assembly of the Fascists planning the March on Rome the participants' voices are associated with the grunting of pigs; Mussolini's voice, uncannily similar to the original, was provided by the renowned voice actor and imitator Alighiero Noschese.

On the other hand, Tretti juxtaposes the utter ridiculousness of Fascism's propaganda with its horrors. Not only the film depicts the various political incarcerations, but it bluntly underlines the economic reasons for Italy's war in Abyssinia and its joining Germany in World War II, and the various massacres that ensued, from the destruction of African villages to the concentration camps and the public hangings of partisans. Here, fiction briefly gives way to horrific documentary footage; but the director has one more sting in the tail, a grim sight gag which depicts the fall of Mussolini with the symbolic image of the rubber mask hung upside down. It alludes to the exposition of the Duce's corpse, hung upside down on meat hooks with other dead Fascist hierarchs, in Piazzale Loreto in Milan (where in August 1944 fifteen partisans had been executed and their bodies mutilated and left on public display, in retaliation for a partisan attack) on April 29, 1945. It is a show-stopping moment, as exhilarating as it is darkly cruel in its allegorical restaging of one of the most infamous images of the Twentieth century, and one which certifies Augusto Tretti's brilliance as a filmmaker.

The fifth and last part of *Il potere* is set in the present. Here, Tretti not only derides the symbols of consumerism, such as when a crowd kneels in front of a new car model presented on a church's steps, but he openly addresses them as a way to manipulate the masses. In a way, the director's vision on the brainwashing of the people by way of the overwhelming consumerism is akin to Pasolini's discourse on the end of sub-proletarian culture.

Meanwhile, the chicken which we saw in the first episode has multiplied, and now there are whole chicken farms, efficient and mechanized, which produce eggs at an amazing rate. Tretti was fascinated by progress, and by the mutation of the rural society into a technological one, here synthesized by the portrayal of chicken farms as a symbol of mass control. In a sequence—very similar in parts to *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*—the owner of a farm, which looks more like a prison, shows to the press and authorities his latest achievement, a "super egg." The abundance of nutrition and the hens depositing one egg after another, much to the marvel of the clergy and the entrepreneurs gathered in the place, are interspersed with images of starving African children and other martyrs of capitalism, such as Martin Luther King.

Then the director comes up with one of the film's most striking ideas: a series of sequences centered on a fictitious object of design named "Moblon"—consisting of two hemispheres placed one on top of the other, and designed by Tretti himself—advertised via songs and posters featuring nude women in provocative poses, and luxuriously packaged. A husband brings the Moblon home as a gift to his wife, and when his elderly father asks what is it for, he replies: "I don't know … but it's fashionable!" The final scene brings us back to the three wild beasts of power and their ultimate trick to dominate the masses: embrace Socialism. The sardonic punchline is accompanied by a distorted version of *The Internationale* and a quote allegedly from Lenin: "But who does not know that nowadays every villain loves to strut in a red dress?"

Despite (or, rather because of) its utter naivety, *Il potere* has an extraordinary force, "as alive as street performances."[20] The use of the same actors in different make-ups underlines the director's thesis, about the recurring patterns which violence and oppression follow over the ages. The acting is purposely anti-naturalistic: "I needed a kind of Brechtian acting," the director explained, "which prevents the identification with the characters on the part of the audience."[21] Even more than *La legge della tromba*, where the absurdist comedy partially allowed a poetic approach, here Tretti's work has a refreshing frankness, like a child calling a spade a spade: the metaphors are evident and immediately readable, the discourse is clear and without any trace of ambiguity, and the lack of cinematic polish forces the viewer to concentrate on the message. At a time where Italian political cinema dealt with such accomplished authors as Elio Petri, Marco Bellocchio and Liliana Cavani, Tretti's work does away with both the burden of ideology and the filter of cinematic shrewdness, and its raw, elementary form makes its subversive core all the more striking. As film critic Ugo Casiraghi wrote, "Tretti is not afraid of the message; on the contrary, he makes it didactic: his aim is to show, in a funny and bitter way, to a simple audience—who, because of this, have the right to be informed with lucidity and accuracy—how the exploitation of man on man is still exerted on the basis of millenary formulas and lies."[22] His producer Federico Pantanella summed it up as follows: "This is cinema made by a peasant, fragmentary but full of ideas."[23]

## *Alcohol ... It's Good for the Blood*

*Il potere* was rather well received at the 1971 Venice Film Festival, and Eugenia Manzoni Tretti recalls with pleasure sitting next to Luchino Visconti, with the director of *Morte a Venezia*—who had personally experienced the horrors of Fascism—laughing out loud throughout the screening.[24] It was distributed in 1972 by Italnoleggio, and like its predecessor did very little money, although the critics generally praised it. Tretti was even awarded a prize (the "Noce d'Oro," Golden Walnut) reserved for the "young talents" in show business[25]—not bad, for a 48-year-old. But members of the Socialist Party didn't like at all Tretti's final stab at them, and in the following years the movie practically disappeared from circulation. It was never broadcast on television for almost three decades, and turned up again on the small screen in the 1990s, in the late night TV program "Fuori orario," which exposed the director's work to young audiences.

It took nine years for Tretti to return behind the camera. "After such a politically uneasy film, which however didn't have chances with the general public, I always found closed doors, even in RAI,"[26] he explained. Meanwhile, he took care of the family business, his farm. He never got married, and lived a secluded life in his 16th century villa in Colà di Lazise, near Verona. There, he bred his beloved animals and rarely traveled. In his spare time, he worked on treatments and scripts. The idea for *Alcool*, a "scientific educational feature film" on the plague of alcoholism, dated 1975. Tretti knew the subject well: his cook Maria Boto had died of alcoholism, having spent all the money she was paid for *La legge della tromba* on booze. For over three years, Tretti repeatedly tried to involve RAI in the production, but to no avail, despite the help of his friend Tonino Guerra. Eventually, he had to rely on the sole Province of Milan, which backed the film's

meager budget, of just 160 million *lire*: once again the actors were non-professionals, and all of them former alcoholics.

The result, however, was something different from a mere documentary. *Alcool* is a fiction film which—after a brief prologue where some intellectuals discuss the issue of alcoholism in today's society while strolling along the Venice Lido—bastardizes the didactic element by following the stories of various characters linked together by their drinking problem. A frustrated housewife is seen intent on obsessively cleaning her house, only to stop every now and then to drink a sip or two of a "Marsala all'uovo" liquor, whose advertisements keep popping up on her TV. A delivery man, Francesco (Marino Grazioli), shows up, carrying beverages, and the woman invites him for a drink; he refuses liquor but gladly accepts a glass of wine, which, he claims, is healthier: soon they are both drunk, sadly complaining about their miserable life. In a Venetian farmhouse, a rural family celebrate the First Communion of a little girl, drinking bottle after bottle of red wine; a peasant even gives his sick little child a glass of wine because "it's good for the blood," and the local priest congratulates him, saying that, in addition to being a nourishment, it is "Christ's blood." An actor in decline, Adone, who advertises whisky on TV for a living, accepts to star in a cheap movie filled with sex and violence; he and his girlfriend have an argument about his declining virility in bed, due to his drinking habits. Other episodes are merely sketches: two truck drivers drink abundantly before hitting the road, and have a deadly accident; a meeting of elderly Alpine soldiers ends with the men dead drunk and carried away by their wives in wheelbarrows; and so on. Soon though, amid all these intertwined episodes, one stands out: the story of Francesco, who loses one job after another because he is always inebriated; after an incident at work he is hospitalized in a clinic, where he experiences horrible nightmares à la *The Lost Weekend* (1945, Billy Wilder), caused by *delirium tremens*, in a sequence shot in black-and-white, the only one in the film.

Tretti considered *Alcool* some sort of a hybrid, and claimed: "I was conditioned by the responsibilities, by the subject. At times it is restrained, with a more traditional, somewhat naturalistic language. Had I won the lottery and produced it by myself, I'd have made a different film, perhaps a better one."[27] The various intertwined stories are shot in a demonstrative, schematic way: the characters continually repeat commonplaces about alcohol, which underline the way its consumption is rooted in our society and associated to a series of beliefs, cultural traditions, social celebrations. The episode set among peasants shows the backwardness of rural civilization, with an immediacy that comes from Tretti's deep knowledge of that world.

But the director often aims at the satirical and the grotesque, and introduces a political discourse that carries on that of *Il potere*, with unexpected and often brilliant nuances. Alcohol is a commercial asset, made glamorous and inviting by television, movies and popular culture. But it is also an instrument of power to keep the masses obedient, such as when during the war the soldiers were given brandy before battle; similarly, a constructor hands some bottles of wine to the workers so that they keep behind schedule with the job. Tretti even reprises the extraordinary grotesque scene in *La legge della tromba* where Mr. Liborio seduces Marta, making her drunk with champagne, and once again he makes a coherent use of music: here, it is Verdi's *Otello*, with the line "*Innaffia l'ugola! Trinca, tracanna!*" (Water the throat! Drink, gulp!).

If the director is especially mordant when he underlines the shallowness of modern life, the weight of advertising in today's society and the importance of appearing rather than being, it is nothing compared with his vitriolic take on the movie business, expressed in the episode centered on Adone. The actor is first seen in a production office, discussing his next role with a director and a ruthless producer. The latter would do anything to sell the film—a sleazy exploitation drama which, he claims, includes "the usual sexual problems: lesbianism, a raped teenager … but it is commercial: the audience will empathize with it…. What is more, it is a political movie: they kill each other, criticize Nazism." The dialogue becomes more and more biting, as the deluded actor attacks the "mystification—always this ideological camouflage which serves as an excuse, as a cover for pornography." The exchange between the producer and the director—a meek type called Topini, who timidly attempts to salvage the movie from the former's requests for more sex and sleaze, only to be humiliated and reduced to silence—couldn't be more explicit about Tretti's vision of contemporaneous Italian cinema. The producer's final line about the audience sounds like an epigraph: "Have you ever seen the audience coming out of a movie theater? They're a bunch of assholes!" No one is immune of responsibilities, though: Topini, once a committed filmmaker who shot working class dramas, has accepted a humiliating directing job; and Adone, who justifies himself by claiming that "if I didn't accept the role, someone else would have had," is compared by his girlfriend to the Nazi soldiers who said they were just obeying orders.

Ultimately, as in *La legge della tromba* and *Il potere*, Tretti reaches a desolate conclusion, no longer concealed by satire and absurdist humor: the film ends with chilling statistics on alcohol consumption and related diseases, only partially mitigated by the director's self-ironic cameo. He appears as himself in the final scene, accused by a drunken man of being a "sellout to the industry of soft drinks, Pepsi Cola, Coca-Cola," intent on a crusade against alcohol while in Italy everything else is going bad. As Casiraghi noted, "We cannot understand the scope of *Alcool* if we don't consider it for what it is: not so much a film on alcoholism, but a film on Italy, where all characters drink because they are pushed by causes that are part of the economic and social structure of the country, of its history, of its existential and cultural desolation, of its consumerist slavery."[28]

*Alcool* was screened at the Venice Film Festival and got mixed reviews,[29] but failed to reach an audience. Like its predecessor, it wasn't even broadcast on TV: "If RAI never broadcast it, it means that there's enough Tretti in *Alcool*,"[30] the director commented.

Five more years passed before Tretti's fourth and last work. In 1985 he directed *Mediatori e carrozze*, a 39-minute featurette, photographed and edited by Maurizio Zaccaro, Ermanno Olmi's assistant; Olmi had been one of Augusto's closest friends since the early 1960s. Zaccaro, who also directed a 25-minute documentary short on Tretti, would debut behind the camera in 1991, with the Gothic ghost story *Dove comincia la notte*, written by Pupi Avati. "To me it was a new experiment," Tretti explained. "My films are not realistic, they are all 'artificial,' they are Brechtian: they have puppet-like acting. So, I wanted to see if I could make a film with direct sound and actors taken from the street. In fact, it's different from my other films, and it's not a film I love. I shot *Mediatori e carrozze* with a TV movie technique, with a more flat and linear language. Even the editing … is not like my style. The only part I feel like mine is the ending."[31]

*Mediatori e carrozze* stars Tretti himself as a schoolteacher who is willing to invest his hard-earned money. He settles upon real estate, and his friends suggest he employs the services of one of the professional intermediaries at the local cattle market, where deals are made by shaking hands, in typical rustic fashion. After a long and unfruitful search for a country house, the man decides to purchase an apartment in town, but he is ripped off by his own intermediary, pays a huge sum for an apartment that's not worth the money, and ends up burdened by debts. He decides to sell the apartment, but nobody wants to buy it. Eventually, following another intermediary's suggestion, he will trade his house for a vintage carriage, in the hope of hiring it for films and social events. The film ends with the carriage driving away in the distance in the countryside, a sight from another era, with Tretti holding the reins.

It is a metaphorical farewell, and an apt conclusion for the director's final work, which underwent the same fate as the previous ones. Despite its original and humorous treatment of real estate crisis, *Mediatori e carrozze* went totally unnoticed; it was broadcast on TV only three years after its making, in a summer afternoon slot, during a program created by Ermanno Olmi, "Di paesi di città."

## *Epilogue: Quixote's Windmills*

Sadly, most of Tretti's output—the huge number of shorts he made before *La legge della tromba*—is lost. Many of his early films were ruined after being stored in his own basement, where they grew musty. Others were destroyed by Tretti's own decision. The few that survived, like *Malavita*, are sadly impossible to watch in their original form. In addition to that, Tretti left behind several unfilmed scripts, always interesting and often astonishingly daring. *La lite* ("The Argument," written with Tonino Guerra and dated 1970) is a cruel description of the battle of the sexes in "a society based on exploitation, consumerism and oppression," where even normal couple relationships become the terrain for arguments, quarrels, recriminations. The script examines the life of an ordinary couple, Gaetano and Aurora, including their sexual fantasies and delusions, with the escalation to a final fight, where husband and wife are depicted like foaming rabid dogs; eventually, after destroying everything, they tear the screen to pieces. This shocking metafilmic twist paves the way for an epilogue set on a desert island which suddenly becomes overpopulated with people quarrelling. In the final image, the crowd of people turn into insects.

Another unfilmed script, *Avvenire inquieto* (or *Duemila inquieto*, possibly developed in the mid-to-late 1980s) is a dystopian fantasy in five episodes set in the future, with grotesque and comic tones. In the first one, Tretti imagines a future where the average life has become so long that the world is dominated by gerontocracy: elderly people rule, young people are few, "tired, apathetic and discouraged," and only those who have white hair get a job. The second episode sounds like one of those Japanese disaster movies of the 1970s, only with a more explicit satirical vein: the countryside is populated by giant farm animals and plagued by insects who eat gigantic, genetically modified fruit; the farmers use pesticides to kill them, starting a war that destroys the fruit, insects, and birds. Only a small bird survives, but it is killed by a bunch of hunters.

The reference to genetically modified chicken pays homage to Mikhail Bulgakov's 1925 philosophical novella *The Fatal Eggs*, rather than to *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*. The third episode, co-written by Tonino Guerra, deals with the election of a future pope, while the fifth one, set on a desert island, basically reprises the ending of *La lite*, and further underlines Tretti's pessimistic vision of society. The director planned to involve Ettore Scola (as producer), singer Lucio Dalla, and even composer Luciano Berio for an avant-garde score, but failed to raise interest and funds on the part of TV executives.

Tretti developed the fourth segment separately into another treatment titled *La battaglia di Lissa*. It was perhaps the closest project to his heart, inspired by the 1866 battle that took place in the Adriatic Sea, during Italy's third war of Independence. The battle of Lissa infamously ended with a humiliating defeat for Italy due to strategical mistakes, lack of coordination, incomprehension and puerile rivalries among the commanders. For over two years, between 1981 and 1983, Tretti—who planned to write the script with Guerra and noted journalist Enzo Biagi, and wanted to shoot the film his own way, on the Lake Garda, with small boats instead of real battleships—knocked at the door of the major TV executives, to no avail. The project emphasized the director's interest in revisiting history in order to capture its true sense, revealing the grotesque reality beneath the official, heroic narration. The same spirit imbued a couple of autobiographic projects, *Il battesimo* and *La brigata inesistente*, set during the partisan war which Tretti knew well. Needless to say, none of them ever saw the light, and they were miraculously discovered after the director's death, which took place on June 7, 2013.

Tretti's career is a one-of-a-kind trajectory within Italian cinema, and yet it is significant of the evolution of the national movie industry through the decades. In the 1950s and early 1960s, it was even possible for someone like Augusto, who had no technical training, lived outside Rome and was totally extraneous to the business, to actually

**Augusto Tretti in his villa in the mid–1980s.**

become a filmmaker and reach an audience, with the mere strength of his ideas. Italian cinema was so strong, and so powerful were its main filmmakers, that the word of a Fellini, or an Antonioni, could allow a Mr. Nobody to reach the public with his work. This could still happen in the mid-to-late Seventies: Nanni Moretti's first feature film *Io sono un autarchico*, released in 1976, was shot on Super8 for peanuts, then blown up to 16mm and released to a general audience, and became a commercial success as well as a cultural sensation. But Moretti's film was the expression of a generational *malaise*, and his young author quickly became a spokesperson for the twentysomethings who felt lost and disillusioned in a decade of political and social crisis. Whereas Tretti was a man alone, a Don Quixote figure pursuing his own vision with an obstinacy and an obtuseness that totally rejected the rules of the game. He was a real autarchic. And with the crisis of cinema, not even television was an option to accommodate such a unique, uncompromising vision.

Don Quixote was getting old, and tired, and there were too many, too many windmills.

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## Augusto Tretti—Essential Filmography

1962 *La legge della tromba* (D, S, SC)
1971 *Il potere* (D, S, SC)
1980 *Alcool* (D, S, SC)
1985 *Mediatori e carrozze* (TV featurette) (D, S, SC)

# 8

# Nello Vegezzi—
# The Baron in the Trees

A filmmaker with experimental ambitions, and the author of only one movie, *Katarsis*, which well deserves the reputation of *maudit*; a political activist; a poet persecuted for obscenity; a painter, sculptor, and one-of-a-kind performing artist. This was Giuseppe "Nello" Vegezzi. But, above all, he was a rebel: intransigent to the rules, to power, to all forms of compromise.

## *The Attack Against the Pear Tree*

*"Io dissento / per sentire / vedere / giocare / e VIVERE."*
(I dissent / to feel / see / play / and LIVE.)

They left late in the evening, after abundant alcoholic libations, on the red Citroën, which Nello had donated to the Party. That morning, the local newspaper *Libertà* had published a long article on Mamma Rosa, the elderly peasant woman who lived in the small hamlet of San Damiano—only 150 residents at about 15 miles from the town of Piacenza, in the region of Emilia Romagna. Mamma Rosa claimed that she could speak with the Virgin Mary, or rather, that the Virgin Mary spoke through her mouth, after they got in touch.

It had first occurred on September 29, 1961, the feast day of the Archangel Michael. Rosa Quattrini, a 62-year-old widow, was then seriously ill and nearly dying; late in the morning, someone had knocked on Rosa's door: it was an unknown woman, wearing a sky-blue shawl over her head, who requested her some money for Padre Pio.[1] Rosa gave her 500 *lire*, half of what she had in her purse. The lady asked her: "Do you believe in Padre Pio?" and after Rosa's affirmative answer they prayed together for a while. Before leaving, the woman touched Rosa's wounds. After she was gone, Rosa was suddenly healed. A few years later, in October 1964, the Virgin Mary appeared again to Mamma Rosa, in the garden, above the pear tree, which reportedly underwent a miraculous blossoming. From then on, each Friday at 12 o'clock sharp, Rosa claimed that the mother of Jesus paid her a visit and passed her messages to the world. Among such messages was that the water pumped from a well dug (at Mary's request) just behind the pear tree had healing properties.

Despite the Vatican dismissing the apparitions as fake, soon San Damiano became a destination for pilgrims from all over the world, and the miraculous blossoming in the fall had become a symbol of divine grace. As such, that pear tree had to be challenged. Or at least that's what was in the minds of the three inebriated militants of the "Partito Comunista d'Italia (marxista-leninista)—Linea Nera" (Italian Communist Party, Marxist-Leninist—Black Line), headed by Nello Vegezzi, a key figure of the Maoist ideology in the city of Piacenza, and a protester by vocation. Nello was adamant: they had to carry on a symbolic, dramatic gesture. Along the way, the protesters loaded their vehicle with everything needed for the occasion: a long ladder to cross the fence around the pear tree, and a huge lumberjack saw.

Once arrived late at night in San Damiano, the men set busily to work. Then, an anonymous phone call at the *Libertà* headquarters followed, to announce that Mamma Rosa's pear tree had been sawn off. "Unfortunately," as Vegezzi himself recalled in a short amateurish documentary made in the mid–1980s, "the next day, the *Libertà* reported the news that the Maoist commando had got the wrong target: they had sawn a plum tree, not the pear one." And yet, the mocking epilogue of the alcoholic attack against the pear tree had an unexpected sting in the tail. In an interview with Mamma Rosa in the magazine *Attualità piacentina*, journalist Gaetano Pantaleoni revealed that the first miraculous blossoming was not that of the pear tree, but of the plum tree nearby, which Our Lady had touched. And so, laughing in his sleeve, Nello Vegezzi summed it up as follows: "And so, mistakenly, we did things right."

The attack at Mamma Rosa's pear tree is a legendary anecdote for those who live in the city of Piacenza. The renowned director Marco Bellocchio even paid homage to it in one of his best films, *Nel nome del padre* (1972): in a scene the young and rebellious Angelo Transeunti (Yves Beneyton), convinced that "all things anti-scientific must be eliminated," and his demented sidekick Tino (Tino Maestroni) saw off the sacred pear tree and "free" the virgin who lived in symbiosis with it. Probably the episode inspired also Pupi Avati, for his 1975 film *La mazurka del barone, della santa e del fico fiorone*, where the atheist baron Anteo Pellacani (Ugo Tognazzi) tries in vain to break down a miraculous fig tree.

But Nello Vegezzi was not only the *éminence grise* behind one of the most bizarre Situationist acts ever concocted in the country: he was also one of the most obscure and marginal artistic figures in post–World War II Italy, not to mention one of the most sorrowful and unfortunate ones.

## *"I'll never come down again"*

*"il bambino / sua natura / è vivacino / si move / s'agita /*
*si esprime / Sta' fermo / impara! / Lui poverino /*
*tranquillo sarà / compassato / "perbenino.""*

(the child / his nature / is lively / he moves / agitates /
expresses himself / Be still / learn! / Poor him /
calm he will be / prim / "stiff.")

Giuseppe Vegezzi was born in Turro, near Piacenza, on December 3, 1929, from a wealthy family of Swiss origin, that had acquired extensive lands from the Church: a

huge farm where about fifty families of peasants worked. For young Giuseppe, whom everybody called Nello, it could have been the beginning of a comfortable life as an old-fashioned country squire: living on the fat of the land, lounging, chasing after skirts.

And yet, like Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, the protagonist of Italo Calvino's masterful *conte philosophique The Baron in the Trees* (*Il barone rampante*, 1957), Nello was a born rebel. In Calvino's novel, set in the Ligurian area of Ombrosa during the 18th century, young Baron Cosimo starts rebellious spats against his parents: after refusing to eat his plate of snails for dinner, he climbs up a tree and vows he will never come down again. He will spend the rest of his life on top of the trees. Like Cosimo, Nello was stubborn and resolute: in his personal Ombrosa, he made up his mind on a decision as shocking and definitive as the one matured by Calvino's young Baron. He did not climb up a tree, but it was just as if he had. The effects would be equally upsetting for himself as well as for his family.

At first, rebellion simply meant to take one step further. Going to Piacenza, and diving into the town's cultural life. Nello became a *habitué* of the literary youth circles, the environment where the groundbreaking magazine *Quaderni Piacentini* would flourish, and met literary critic Piergiorgio Bellocchio and his younger brother Marco, who would become one of Italy's best directors. Nello kept a low profile, but did not give up his taste for provocation. And, ultimately, rather than the lounges where young bourgeois men discussed politics and poetry, he preferred the slices of life he could find near the banks of the river Trebbia, and he chose the company of streetwalkers over that of intellectuals.

Meanwhile, the relationship with his family became more and more difficult. Nello felt he had to leave Piacenza. At any cost. After finishing high school, he enrolled at the Faculty of Medicine in Parma. But his passion was cinema: Vertov, Dreyer, Eisenstein.... He left university and moved to Paris. There, from 1954 to 1958, he attended the prestigious "Institut des hautes études cinématographiques" (Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies), headed by Marcel l'Herbier. Back in Italy, he settled in Rome, and devoted himself to various projects, all of which invariably failed. In a letter to his sister Janna dated late 1961, Nello recounted the sad fate of his latest one, *La risacca*, which had stalled due to lack of funds. The footage he shot in the isle of Ustica, under bad weather conditions and unspecified "trouble of all kinds," was too little, and the distributor, who had promised 30 million *lire*, didn't dare take the risk. Nello was desperate:

> You know what this means to me: again collapse, again rubble, again humiliations and discouragement. And once again I succumb to crisis and stay alive. And once again the "others" destroy my house. And once again I get up, shake the dust off my shoulders, and build it up again. I believe in "my house." I want to make a movie.[2]

## *The Pact with the Devil*

*"stavo bene a Roma / giravo e cantavo / a squarciagola / tutte le notti /—l'Italia l'è malada / Lenin l'è il suo / dottore Lenin / l'è il suo dottor ... / mi hanno preso / picchiato / incatenato / e mandato via / da Roma."*

(I was fine in Rome / I walked around and sang / loud /
every night /—Italy is ill / Lenin is its /
Lenin is / its Doctor Lenin / is its doctor … /
they took me / beat me / chained me /
and sent me away / from Rome.)

In the same letter, Nello told at length about a script he had written, which seemed finally to become a film. The scenario, initially titled *La bella e il diavolo* (The Beauty and the Devil), was the story of a group of young punks who seem the bourgeois version of those described by Pasolini in his 1959 novel *Una vita violenta*. After a series of violent misdeeds, the juvenile delinquents end up in a gloomy manor, where they meet an old man who has sold his soul to the devil. There, they face a series of experiences that will bring them, the next morning, to a renewed existential self-consciousness. The Gothic palimpsest of the tale and the nods to the Faustian pact are a pretext for a bulky symbolic discourse.

As Vegezzi wrote in his explicatory notes to the script,

> The action takes place in the modern era, and in an unspecified location. The six young men represent the outer life. They are the embodiment of life as the exasperation of the "present." Outside good and evil. A symbol of "recklessness" and "pure instinct." The old lord of the castle is meant to portray the exasperated inner life, brought to the level of Faustian fanaticism. Life as non-acceptance of "becoming" and exasperation of the "past." Beyond good, beyond evil. The symbol of "exasperated conscience" and ascetic fanaticism. The castle is meant to be the allegoric-symbolic visualization of the "collective unconscious." It is here that, from the meeting of two opposite misconceptions of life, the "awareness" takes place which brings the characters to a "sublimation" or katarsis [*sic*].[3]

The references to behaviorism, Dashiell Hammett, Rafael Sánchez Ferlosio and the *Nouveau Roman* scattered liberally by the debuting director in his explicatory notes sound wildly overambitious. And yet, Vegezzi's idea to shoot the passage from reality to the so-called "surreality" without interruption, but through the "gradual integration of real characters in a climate, atmosphere and scenic space of extreme stylization," was intriguing to say the least. As the director elaborated, "There must be a genuine osmosis between reality and surreality—that is, in other words, reality must include surreality, and on the other hand surreality is rooted, and always present, in reality." To do this, Vegezzi decided to adopt a film style made of long sequence shots, and a narrative approach closer to avant-garde filmmaking and experimental stage plays than to genre cinema. He would do away with close-ups and extreme close-ups, replace them with long static shots in which the characters would "perform individual actions according to a precise alternation of sound volumes," and eliminate the dialogue almost completely.

Initially Nello hoped to set up the film as an Italian-Spanish co-production. But there was an obstacle to get around: for the direction, the distributor requested "the warranty of a well-known name and a solid quantitative activity already accomplished in the field of directing." The debuting Vegezzi was a total unknown, but since his sister was married to the son of Spanish director Gonzalo Delgrás, he thought he could take advantage of that:

> I thought of José's father. Ask him if he is willing to supervise the direction, and in case to co-direct. His name in the technical cast would surely persuade the distributors to accept my direc-

tion. Moreover, I would be definitely advantaged in my work by his experience and craft. If he is not interested in this sense, please ask him if he can send a letter of introduction, listing, if possible, a certain number of my works as assistant director in Spanish films.

The fact that Nello had never worked as assistant on any movie set, let alone Spanish ones, did not seem to be a problem. As he told Janna, "there is no risk whatsoever, since it's a mere bureaucratic formality, and being films that have never been released outside the Spanish market."

Optimistically, Nello claimed that shooting was to start on January 22, 1962. He claimed that the production would be *Nouvelle Vague–like*, that is low-budget and attempting to blend artistic and commercial needs. He dreamt of casting "a well-known Spanish actor as the lord of the castle and a well-known Spanish actress as the lady of the castle," and possibly Janna's sister-in-law Marguerita Robles Pardo as script supervisor. But it would take over a year before the project would finally set in motion, without any foreign contribution.

The Italian company financing *Katarsis* was the bizarrely-named I Film della Mangusta (Mongoose Films), administered by Fernando Cerqua, Spartaco Antonucci and Ulderico Sciarretta. The crew included future director Paolo Bianchini (as Vegezzi's assistant), director of photography Mario Parapetti and art director Andrea Crisanti, and the cast featured only eight actors, mostly little-known names: Giorgio Ardisson (who would soon become a star of the Italian spy genre) as the group's leader Gugo, Piero Vida (Pietro Vidali) as Peo, Mario Zacarti (real name Mario Polletin) as Gian, and three girls, Lilly Parker, Anita Drejer and Bella Cortez, whose exotic pseudonyms concealed very Italian names, respectively Vittoria Centroni, Anita Cacciolati and Alice Paneque. Similarly, in the shooting plan Vegezzi is referred to as "Joseph Vegh."

**On the set of *Katarsis*, left to right: Mario Zacarti, Vittoria Centroni, Alice Paneque, Anita Cacciolati, Nello Vegezzi (with sunglasses), Giorgio Ardisson and Piero Vida (courtesy Camillo Vegezzi).**

However, the producers managed to cast at least a prestigious name: Christopher Lee, who in that period was very active on Italian sets. The British thespian was one of Vegezzi's ideal choices for the role: in one of his notebooks he wrote down a list of prestigious names which also included Max von Sydow, Jack Palance, Alain Cuny, Michel Simon, Peter Van Eyck and a couple of Italians, Salvo Randone and Arnoldo Foà.

Lee played two roles in the film: made-up as an octogenarian, he is the lord of the castle, and at the end of the film, without make-up, he is a man whom the young punks, now redeemed, assist after a car accident. The film benefited also from the presence of a graduate from the CSC (Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, the film school in Rome) Adriana Ambesi, in the brief role (only four days on the set) as the lady of the castle, who in a scene emerges from a grandfather's clock, an image that predates Jean Rollin's films. Ambesi was enjoying a modest popularity in the period, after a report published in the weekly magazine *Le ore*, in which she candidly stated that aspiring actresses did not find work because "at CSC they haven't been taught the most important thing. That is, to accept reality and know how to choose the appropriate bed to make a quick career," adding that it had been Alessandro Blasetti himself, the renowned director of *La corona di ferro* (1941) and a teacher at the CSC, to tell them these very words.[4] Ambesi's career was nonetheless undistinguished. Her best-known role was in Camillo Mastrocinque's *La cripta e l'incubo*, alongside Lee.

In his autobiography, Lee (who stayed on the set only one week and never saw the dailies, nor the finished film) does not seem to have a clear idea on what the film was about:

> *Katarsis* was very hard for those involved to follow. It seemed to be about drop-outs who find an old man in a castle, who turns into the Devil and seizes them, but no one was ever sure. In its efforts to find itself, the film forked into two films, the sequel being *Faust '63*. I was Faust in the first and Mephistopheles in the other, which must have confused people with the strength to see both.[5]

Actually, yes, *Katarsis* forked into two, but not in the sense Lee thought. And, no, eventually virtually nobody saw the movie, and certainly not in the form its director had originally conceived.

First of all, the question regarding *Faust '63* must be clarified. *Faust '63* was actually the title of the script Vegezzi had deposited at SIAE offices in early 1963, before the movie became *Katarsis*, as proven by the private agreement between the director and I Film della Mangusta, dated April 13, 1963. The censorship committee which examined the script preventively (a practice introduced during Fascism and still active in the early 1960s despite the new law on censorship dated April 1962 had radically innovated the matter) was not impressed, commenting that "the story expresses itself very confusedly," and concluding that "the work—hooked to reminiscences of the German romanticism—leaves many perplexities about its artistic and commercial success. However, since the script has been meticulously planned, all that remains to do is to wait and view the finished film."

*Katarsis* was shot in spring 1963, with the subtitle *L'orgia* and a budget of just 46 million *lire*: the exteriors were shot at Montelibretti, and the interiors were filmed at Olimpia Studios in Rome (for the abstract stylized scenes) and at one of the Gothic genre's most recurrent locations, the Odescalchi Castle in Bracciano. According to

the shooting plan, filming was supposed to go on for 27 days, from May 14 to June 15, 1963.

Paolo Bianchini, who stayed on the set for a brief period, recalled Vegezzi's determination and passion, and how difficult it was for him to recreate concretely on the set the mental and symbolic image he had in mind. Unfortunately, trouble for the debuting director began almost immediately. Vegezzi never perceived the 900,000 *lire* that were granted to him by his contract, and when the producer threatened to halt the shooting, the young director asked his father and brother for money to salvage his project. He obtained a providential funding of nearly 4 million *lire*, enough to complete *Katarsis*. In addition to that, affairs of the heart nearly turned the filming into tragedy: "A young director jumps from a window but ends on a shed and saves his life," a newspaper article reported in July.[6] Vegezzi later told the police that he was looking out the window of his bathroom on the second floor when he had a dizzy spell and fell down, but nobody believed his story. Truth was, Nello had fallen for one of the actresses in his movie, the blonde Vittoria Centroni, a.k.a. Lilly Parker, and had been shattered by the woman's rejection.

After his hospital stay, Vegezzi viewed the first rough cut of the film—possibly incomplete—and was not at all happy with it. He prepared a detailed list of changes, both visual and sound, including the introduction of a voice-over that would explain "the technique of the objective behaviorism" which the director had followed, and which was aimed at involving the audience into an active participation in the movie. In fact, Vegezzi wrote, "following a rigorously objective analysis offered to him by the author, the viewer will draw his own free synthesis and become a "free character" and "free author."" His directions would remain on paper. Embittered and depressed, Nello returned to his hometown, practically abandoning the movie to its destiny.

The private correspondence between Vegezzi and actor Piero Vida, who acted as intermediary between Vegezzi and the producers Antonucci and Sciarretta, allows us to follow step by step the bitter fate of *Katarsis*. Nello had hoped that his film be selected for the 1963 Venice Film Festival, and was toying with a new project, *Lo scarabeo d'oro* (The Golden Beetle), at least namely based on Poe's story; in a letter dated August 10, the actor urged him to start working on the new script, because "there are many chances to make it, and especially, I think, in a much more decent manner with regard for the director," adding that "even in the film industry friendship or being tied to people can be negative."[7]

Although in the letter Vida mentions that *Katarsis* was not "completely finished," it had been submitted all the same to the censorship commission, which examined it right on August 10, the very day Vida wrote his heartfelt letter. In the latter he also begged Vegezzi not to leave *Katarsis* to its destiny but, once the movie had entered the distribution circuit, to "make some noise." Another letter, dated August 23, hints at Vida's frustrations at Vegezzi's sudden mood swings, as the actor mentions his repeated attempts to get in touch with the director by phone ("4 p.m.: I called you, no one answered; 6 p.m.: I called you, no one answered; 8 p.m.: I called you, no one answered"). The attempt to obtain a Venice screening was unsuccessful, even though the director Luigi Chiarini (at least according to Vida) was willing to help and would have gladly seen the movie, had it been finished in time.

Meanwhile I Film della Mangusta was seemingly more interested in another project, a French co-production titled *Sexi Party* [*sic*] which Vida labeled as "a fucked-up thing,"[8] and Sciarretta was adamant that he would not invest any money in screenings of *Katarsis*. In those days the company also changed hands: the new proprietors were a certain Mr. Barlini and Silvio Polletin, who, Vida implied in a letter dated August 26, wanted to make further changes to the film. The actor urged Vegezzi to "withdraw the money as soon as possible, and cautiously," referring to the sum Nello had anticipated to finish the film, and ended the letter with a disheartened: "We'll see what else will happen in that sea of words and falseness."

Despite Vida's words, the film's commercial destiny was doomed. *Katarsis* obtained the censorship visa on August 31, 1963, with a V.M.18 rating, but it was a dead horse right from the beginning. The producers tried in vain to sell the film to Olimpia Cinematografica, then submitted *Katarsis* to Adriatica Films, and eventually screened it at the "Trippoli" theater in the town of Canosa, near Bari, with the title arbitrarily changed to *Sfida al diavolo*. The response was searing: the distributor rejected the film, calling it "boring crap, with non-existent direction and awful actors." Soon afterwards, in late February 1964, I Film della Mangusta went bankrupt.

Two years later, in May 1965, *Katarsis* was still in a limbo. In late 1964, in a desperate move, Vegezzi had got in touch with a French producer friend, Alain Raygot of Unitec France, and offered him the movie, which he claimed to be unfinished due to lack of money, and missing about 15 minutes. "I am absolutely willing to finish it according to your indications, justified by a knowledge of the market much superior than mine."[9] By this time, Nello was much more prone to compromises, as hinted not only by the promise to deliver additional commercial scenes, but also by his allusion to a sexier version to be prepared for foreign markets: "I also agree either to do it myself or for you to shoot the double-scenes necessary for the sale to certain countries." Raygot had suggested Vegezzi to add scenes featuring the devil, as well as scenes of "the devil's daughters seducing the three lads,"[10] which he claimed were "indispensable," with the obvious aim of turning *Katarsis* into a sexy horror film. Raygot in turn got in touch with a U.S. financer, but the attempt ended in nothing, not least because of the movie's bad reputation. "I spoke about your work to another person. Unfortunately, he had already heard about the film, and in rather bad terms," Raygot wrote.

Eventually *Katarsis* was purchased by the company Eco Film, owned by none other than Ulderico Sciarretta. Nello hoped that this way the film would be finally given the chance to be properly released, and he likely suggested the producer the possibility of a new version. He certainly alerted Raygot in May 1965, urging him to get in touch with Eco Film as soon as possible: "I have spoken with the producer, and our solution might save the film."[11] In a letter to Vegezzi, that same month, Vida inquired: "But now are you going to do these reshoots or not?," adding: "Time chews many things, and unfortunately runs fast." In hindsight, his farewell line sounds painfully, if inadvertently, mocking: "Once this blessed *Katarsis* has been released, you will surely be able to make many more films, the first one is the hardest one."[12]

The original letter appears to have been torn to pieces, a sign that Vegezzi's feelings toward the actor were not amicable—something confirmed by a significant telegram (undated) sent by the director:

> Situation overturned. I declare to you that I have found the "RHYTHM" of hipsters [*sic*] times and advise you against intervening in the matters regarding *KATARSIS*. Otherwise get in touch with my lawyer, who will report to me. The same goes for Charletta [*sic*], already appropriately warned. Stop. Over. And GOODBYE TO YOU.

What had happened, then?

The private agreement between Vegezzi and the production company contained a clause that expressly allowed the latter's right to make "the changes to the story and the script that the company, either during filming, or after the presentation to the public, believes in its sole discretion to be useful and appropriate," as well as the right to transfer such rights to a third party. This is what happened when *Katarsis* was purchased by Eco Film. A letter to Vegezzi, dated June 9, 1965, announced that the worst was yet to come:

> You are aware of the film's drawbacks, which made it impossible to release theatrically and uncommercial, to the point that it was rejected by the distributors.
>
> We have prepared a specific script for the indispensable reshoots, based on a story by our Executive Producer [author's note: Ulderico Sciarretta], which will make it acceptable to the public and marketable.
>
> We therefore invite you to communicate with us, within five days from this letter, whether you wish to have your respected name appear as the author of the story, the script and the artistic direction of the film, which will undergo a title change.[13]

In short, Sciarretta had decided to shoot additional scenes, but *not* those Vegezzi had envisaged, and his intervention was much more relevant and damaging to the film's original concept. Needless to say, Nello immediately resorted to the law, in an attempt to have the original negative seized in order to avoid tampering, but in vain.

Sciarretta, along with Vida, proceeded to re-edit the movie arbitrarily, distorting its structure and style, fragmenting Vegezzi's sequence shots, replacing the original soundtrack and adding a pernicious, moralistic voice-over that haunts the viewer throughout the film. In addition to that, Sciarretta shot a new slapdash framing story which, in the lack of better terms, can be roughly described as "apostolical *film noir*."

The movie, now retitled *Sfida al diavolo* like in its unfortunate 1963 screening, opens with a man taking refuge in a convent to hide from a gangster from Beirut. There, he meets a monk named Father Remigio (Vida) who agrees to help him. Father Remigio goes to a shady nightclub to retrieve incriminating documents: there he meets an adipose dancer (Alma Del Rio), and in order to persuade her into giving him the papers, he decides to tell her his own tragic story. "Have you ever asked yourself why I became a monk?" "What do I know? You've always been such a weird guy!" she replies. Father Remigio then tells her the Faust-like parable, which was the film's original core. In fact, when he was known to the world as Peo, he was one of the punks who spent the night in the haunted castle, and had been so affected by the experience that he took the vows.

About 20 minutes into the film, we finally get to see what is left of Vegezzi's original footage. It amounts to approximately 55 minutes overall. It is shortened and reshaped, and there is no trace of Vegezzi's long takes. What is more, it is now accompanied by Peo's insufferable voice-over: "We were like animals: we liked the taste of blood and uncontrolled violence," he recalls during the orgy scene, which in Vegezzi's concept should have been devoid of any dialogue, and accompanied only by music. In the final scene, we return to Father Remigio and Alma Del Rio: the latter, in tears, is so deeply

moved by the story ("You have managed to ruin my evening!") that she gives him the papers. Father Remigio returns to his convent, alone in the night, accompanied by church organ music. The end.

Sciarretta's additions, shot with director of photography Angelo Baistrocchi, include Del Rio's cellulitic dance routine, which looks like a very bad copy of the night club acts featured in the sexy reports of the period, like the ones Giulio Questi filmed in Paris, and the song *Ti hanno visto* performed by singer Sonia (real name Sonia Scotti), presented in the credits as a "star of the Argentinian song." There is also room for one of the most embarrassing product placements in Italian film history, long before J&B became the irreplaceable accessory in every Italian lounge room captured on screen: after welcoming the wounded and hunted gangster in the convent, the guardian monk hands him a drink from a bottle with no visible label, saying, "Don't pay attention to the bottle: this is real "Stock '84" brandy. I've been told to buy a cheaper one, but since I drink it myself I don't care about the price." This line was also the object of complaints on the part of the Ministry of Spectacle when *Sfida al diavolo* was resubmitted to the censors, as it emerges from a letter dated October 1965, where the producer claims that the "Brendy" [*sic*]'s label had been expunged from the dialogue, which clearly was not. Last but not least, it is worth noting that the guardian monk is played by Sciarretta himself.

The new cut ran nine minutes shorter than the previous one: 78 minutes compared to the 87 of the original version. According to the Ministry of Spectacle, which examined the producer's request to obtain Italian nationality (and the sum of money granted by law to all films officially labeled "Italian"), "given the irrelevance of the alterations, the film itself cannot be considered other than as authorized by the projection to the public in 1963 under the title *Katarsis*." Given the amount of alterations performed on Nello's original, the Ministry's decision is quite debatable: *Sfida al diavolo* cannot be considered the same film as *Katarsis*, neither in style nor in spirit.

The sad destiny of *Katarsis* is enlightening about the ways in which the movie business often works, and on the vexed question of a film's paternity. It also tells a lot about the way a motion picture can change radically from its conception to the moment when it is distributed to an audience, often outside its maker's will. Not that Nello Vegezzi's original cut was some forgotten masterpiece, but it had the dignity and the right that any work of art should have, regardless of its aesthetic and artistic value: to be the expression of its author's vision. This was denied to *Katarsis*: to this day, the original cut of the film seems lost.

*Sfida al diavolo* was promoted as an out-and-out horror film and accompanied by a Gothic-style poster. Newspaper ads featured the absurd tagline "*un giallo più giallo del giallo—Una Sonia che rallegra l'ambiente del vizio*" (A *giallo* more *giallo* than *giallo*—A Sonia who cheers up the environment of vice), referring to Sonia Scotti's musical number, to the audience's predictable indifference. Adding insult to injury, the director's name was misspelled in the credits and on the publicity material as "Giuseppe *Veggezzi*," giving way to an error that perpetrates to this day.[14]

Nello declared war. "A comic book-like horror film or a movie with a moralizing purpose?," an article on *Paese Sera* stated, reporting Vegezzi's decision to sue Eco Film. Claiming that his rights as the author of the film had been violated, he demanded the

"elimination and suppression of the mutilations, deformations and additions abusively perpetrated and, consequently, the restoration of the picture in its previous form, according to the original script,"[15] as well as the destruction of the new version.

The bankruptcy of Eco Film in 1967, which caused the interruption of the lawsuit, was a mortal blow to the director's hopes. Vegezzi's lawyer, Pietro Ricci, suggested to him to offer 2 million *lire* to buy the movie back from the insolvency administrator. Nello, by then reduced to dire straits and no longer benefitting from his family's financial help, offered only 500,000 *lire*. Around September 1969, he informed Ricci that there arose a chance of selling *Katarsis* to the U.S. TV circuit, but this proved to be yet another delusion. In November 1970, Ricci—tired of Vegezzi's persistent indifference, returned his mandate.

***Katarsis* was finally released in 1965 as *Sfida al diavolo*, promoted as an out-and-out horror film, and accompanied by a Gothic-style poster (art by Mario Piovano / Studio Paradiso).**

After missing the opportunity of purchasing the film, Vegezzi left *Katarsis* to its destiny, and fell victim to a deep depression that further mined his mind and body. He moved away from Rome and returned to his hometown of Piacenza. Cinema was a closed chapter to Nello. His experience as a filmmaker had been a defeat—more: a humiliation. As Marco Bellocchio explained, "He did not have the strength of mediation and compromise, and especially of the relationship with others, which is mandatory in the film business. You must constantly talk, persuade, resist. And he didn't have that in him."[16]

## *From Dissent to Aestheterotics*

*"Ma che cazzo di mondo / è, / QUESTO, / che ti nega / anche / il gusto / della umiliazione!?"*

("What fucking world / is, / THIS, / which denies you / even / the taste / of humiliation!?")

Back in Piacenza, Vegezzi became more and more mercurial, unpredictable, unreliable. His family had entrusted him with the breeding of a herd of bulls. One night, during a snowstorm, Nello freed them. The violent rejection of rules was the most vehement symptom of the detachment from family and from his own bourgeois roots, which took the form of a psychic malaise and worsened over the years: Vegezzi went through bouts of depression, hallucinations and drug abuse.

One of the reasons behind his mood swings is revealed in a letter to Vida dated 1968, while the lawsuit about *Katarsis* went on: "Now I'm asking you a favor, and please don't think I'm doing wrong, because just finding the courage to write about it makes me feel good. It's about Lilli. You must let me know where she is what she does how she lives…. I want to know about her." Vegezzi kept thinking about Centroni, and wrote many poems about her, baring his soul naked. Poetry became a way to release his rage and give shape to his feelings. It was a way out from the insufferable prison of everyday life. Another escape was politics.

Nello became a very active voice in the political world of his hometown. His position was ultra-leftist, anarchic and Marxist. He enrolled in the "PCD'I—Linea nera" party, and in his verses he openly proclaimed his intolerance toward religion. One poem reads: "*io non credo / in dio / ma / ancora meno / credo / in chi crede / in dio*." (I don't believe / in god / but / even less / I believe / in those who believe / in god.") One night Nello even walked around town with a bucket of paint, writing "God is dead" on the church walls. He ended up spending a night in jail.

Vegezzi's discomfort and antagonism found an outlet in his first book of poetry, *Dal dissenso all'esteterotica* (From Dissent to Aestheterotics), published in 1969. Due to the explicitly erotic content of many verses, the book underwent a trial for obscenity, and many poets and literates intervened in Vegezzi's defense, including Pier Paolo Pasolini, Dacia Maraini, Giambattista Vicari, Francesco Leonetti and Andrea Zanzotto. Vegezzi was acquitted during the inquiry, but the scandal was exacerbated by his upper-class origins. In his poems he talked about drugs, war, and the hatred for his "white emaciated land" and for bourgeois values. *Cara Marijuana troppo cara* (Dear Overpriced Marijuana) is like a small-town version of Lou Reed's lyrics for The Velvet Underground song *I'm Waiting for the Man*, which climaxes in a dazzling final verse: "*Ma che cazzo di mondo / è, / QUESTO, / che ti nega / anche / il gusto / della umiliazione!?*" ("What fucking world / is, / THIS, / which denies you / even / the taste / of humiliation!?"). Vegezzi gave voice also to his contempt for money, and some of his most intense lines convey a grudge toward the family that brings to mind Marco Bellocchio's early films, such as *I pugni in tasca* (a.k.a. *Fists in the Pocket*, 1965) and *In nome del padre*. The autobiographical content speaks for itself: "*Dorme / SOGNA il papà buono / una Madre senza CAPITALE / la casa un Paradiso … / svegliati IDIOTA! / tuo padre e Tua madre / ti HANNO / Messo In Piedi / per CASTRARTI / e Dopo buttarti / FUORI DI CASA*." (He sleeps / DREAMS of the good father / a Mother without CAPITAL / the house a Paradise … / wake up you IDIOT / your father and Your mother / HAVE / Raised You / to CASTRATE YOU / and Then throw you / OUT OF YOUR HOME.)

Other collections of poetry followed, mostly self-published and minimally distributed: *Le radici dell'esserci* (1972), *Il Quagliodromo* (1975), *Una estate un inverno* (1978) and *La terra ed io* (1986). The lucky few who read them were fascinated by Vegezzi's

verses. Some praised them as a link between Situationism and the contemporary American poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso, for their original use of language, their irregular metrics, and the element of profanity as a means to shock the reader. They are mostly very short poems, often characterized by erotic themes and by a physicality that sometimes becomes visionary. Nello's aspiration was a carnal return to Nature, seen as a great mother that takes the place of the natural one, and soothes the misery and despair of ordinary life. There is a deep malaise in Vegezzi's verses, which pairs with the poet's obstinate rejection of orthodoxy and the values inculcated by what he calls "*educastrazione*" (educastration). But there is also a playful and self-ironic vein in them, which turns desperation into sneer.

Nello declaimed his lyrics anywhere, in taverns or during improvised happenings, whether they be trivial invectives, sweet words of love or meditations about his land. With his Nietzschean mustaches, thick accent and stinging eyes behind the dark glasses, he became a peculiar figure during the turbulent post–1968 years, a crazed provocateur as well as a melancholic cantor of a rural culture which was about to disappear, praising an idyllic, impossible "return to the land."

## *Return to the Land*

"*saldo ferri / arrugginiti / trovati così / per caso /*
*e mi ritrovo / così per caso / a saldare / ferri arrugginiti.*"

(I solder iron / rusty / found like this / by chance /
and I find myself / like this by chance / soldering / rusty iron.")

Then his inner turmoil took new, unpredictable ways. Vegezzi developed a passion for sculpture and painting. He did not sculpt in the traditional sense of the term, though, but assembled recycled material and turned it into something new and surprising: a rusty pair of pliers was transformed into a catfish, a splinter of wood became a multicolored parrot. He called it "*accattoplastica*." (plastic-begging.) It was yet another return to nature, which "upsets my being, perturbates me, I try to treat her as a human being … she is a friend, a soul, she is palpitating and sensually alive." Vegezzi's sculptures are beautiful creations not only in themselves, but for what they imply: the ability to see beyond things, to grasp grace and beauty in a crude shape and form, and turn with a few touches a piece of junk into a work of art worthy of admiration. The ability, in short, to give life and meaning to things, and bring their soul to the surface. In a way, even this is poetry. Even this is (may Vegezzi forgive me) a miracle.

Similarly, Nello's approach to painting was far from traditional. As in his poems, he looked for the essence, the strength, the synthesis. No brush, nor canvas: he squeezed the colors directly from the tubes, or smeared them over raw and rough surfaces (a fragment of wood, a stone, a brick, a window), never mixing them but leaving them in their primary essence. A painting of timbre, but not naive at all. To those who asked him if he believed in the union of art and recklessness, he answered that, on the contrary, art demands utter concentration and dedication. In this, his art was coherent with his personal beliefs. Vegezzi never tried to make it a commercial activity, or a way to make

himself known to a wider audience. He shunned the artistic world, and sold his creations for ridiculously low prices.

Every now and then Nello Vegezzi's name returned to the limelight, thanks to his provocative actions, closer to the Situationists, like the infamous "attack against the pear tree," or the erotic performance *Topo, topa, topoerotica* (April 1982). The latter aimed to "give some room to pure instinct" through a procession of "eroticized mice" (mimes and dancers dressed as mice) across the center of Piacenza, which climaxed in an erotic dance accompanied by a reading of Vegezzi's poetry. Still, Nello remained a loner, an outsider, and a born contrarian—such as when, in 1977, in *Libro aperto*, he wrote scathing verses about the late Pier Paolo Pasolini: "*Pier Paolo sei morto / e noi / non piangiamo per te / … eri falso e saccente / come l'accattone / del tuo 'Accattone'/ … Pier Paolo sei morto / NON CI INCANTI PIÙ.*" ("Pier Paolo you're dead / and we / don't cry for you / … you were false and pedantic / like the beggar / in your '*Accattone*' / … Pier Paolo you're dead / YOU ARE NO LONGER CHARMING US.")

In 1992, the renowned publisher Vanni Scheiwiller collected Vegezzi's best poems in the book *Le radici dell'esserci e altre poesie 1967–1991*. That same year, after the exhibition *Bestiario*, dedicated to his works of *accattoplastica*, Vegezzi's name seemed on the verge of finally breaking through beyond the narrow circle of the friends and intellectuals of his hometown. Unfortunately, Nello's condition had deteriorated over time. He suffered from hallucinations, and heard voices in his head that threatened and haunted him. Sometimes these voices became obsessive, and affected his everyday life in an almost unbearable way. Vegezzi took large quantities of medical drugs in order to make the voices stop, but that did not help much. One night, in June 1993, in the throes of the umpteenth crisis, Nello felt he could not stand it any longer. He took his bike and rode to the emergency room at the Piacenza hospital, where he was administered a dose of tranquilizers. On the road back home, late at night, in the countryside, a hit-and-run vehicle driving at full speed ran over him. The mangled body was found the following day.

Such was the sad and lonely end of Nello Vegezzi. And yet I dream another one, fairer and much more poetic.

In *The Baron in the Trees*, feeling that death is approaching, the elderly Cosimo climbs atop the tallest tree and, with one last jump, clings to the rope from a passing balloon, finally disappearing in the sky. Calvino's novel ends as follows: "On the family tomb there is a plaque in commemoration of him, with the inscription: 'Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò—Lived in the trees—Always loved the earth—Went into the skies.'"

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## Giuseppe "Nello" Vegezzi—Essential Filmography

1963 *Katarsis/Sfida al diavolo* (D, S, SC)

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# Chapter Notes

## Chapter 1

1. "Minacce e consensi agli 'Amici di Fabbri,'" *Corriere della Sera*, September 22, 1966.
2. Pier Carpi, *Enciclopedia dei fumetti vol. 1* (Milan: Sansoni, 1970), 206.
3. Pier Carpi, "Il romanzo e il film di Diabolik," *Fumetti d'Italia* #2, May 1992, 12.
4. *Ibid.* For a detailed history of the two Diabolik adaptations, see Roberto Curti, *Diabolika: Superheroes, Supercriminals and the Italian Comic Book Universe in Italian Cinema* (Baltimore, MD: Midnight Marquee Press, 2016), 94–110.
5. "Calendario," *Corriere della Sera*, February 21, 1968.
6. "Lo scrittore Carpi diffida Zeffirelli," *Corriere della Sera*, October 10, 1970.
7. The "Golpe Borghese" inspired Mario Monicelli's brilliant satirical comedy *Vogliamo i colonnelli* (1973).
8. Anna Preianò, "Personaggi horror. Intervista ad Alfredo Castelli," www.mattatoio5.com, May 26, 2015.
9. "Cagliostro (riabilitato) torna a S. Leo," *Corriere d'Informazione*, July 19, 1971.
10. Pier Carpi, *Cagliostro il taumaturgo* (Turin: Edizioni MEB, 1972), 14.
11. See the chapter on Alberto Cavallone for more details.
12. "Marlon Brando a Torino?," *Stampa Sera*, July 31, 1974.
13. Davide Pulici, "Intervista a Evelyn Stewart (2011)," www.nocturno.it, March 25, 2016.
14. "Un milanese per Manzoni," *Corriere d'Informazione*, March 10, 1973. The article is centered on actor Sergio Masieri, who reportedly played a murderous Jesuit priest. However, there is no trace of Masieri in the film, and the role is played by Adolfo Lastretti.
15. Piero Perona, "Il Cagliostro a St. Vincent porta grane in anteprima," *Stampa Sera*, January 20, 1975.
16. Davide Pulici, "Il tuttofare," *Misteri d'Italia 4. Guida ai film rari e scomparsi. Nocturno Cinema* #103, March 2011, 81.
17. Perona, "Il Cagliostro a St. Vincent porta grane in anteprima."
18. "Sarà Gesù bambino in un giallo religioso la figlia di Tito Stagno," *Corriere d'Informazione*, 15 January 1975. The article announces Carpi's casting of 12-year-old Caterina Stagno (daughter of famed TV journalist Tito Stagno): "Why did I choose a girl to play Jesus? Because I think that in a modern story, only a girl could recreate the intensity of Christ's face." Caterina Stagno was also Carpi's first choice for the role of Daria in *Un'ombra nell'ombra*.
19. "Si cerca bambino per ruolo di Gesù," *Corriere della Sera*, January 16, 1973.
20. Adele Gallotti, "Reitano, povero cristo," *Stampa Sera*, February 14, 1975.
21. Pulici, "Il tuttofare." Siragusa also claimed that Carpi gave him a Western script, *La pistola sull'altare*, the story of a gunslinger who is tired of killing and leaves his gun on a church altar, vowing to God that he will never use it again—but the Devil intervenes.
22. "Jacqueline Kennedy in un film di Pier Carpi," *Corriere della Sera*, November 12, 1975.
23. R.s.s., "Pier Carpi denuncia per plagio Durbridge e *Dimenticare Lisa*," *Stampa Sera*, October 19, 1976.
24. Fabrizio De Santis, "Esplode la polemica sulle "profezie" attribuite al defunto Papa Giovanni," *Corriere della Sera*, November 17, 1976.
25. "Lascia il set per non dire una battuta antiaborto," *Stampa Sera*, February 28, 1977.
26. "Sequestro per l'Hitler di Celentano?," *Stampa Sera*, October 12, 1978.
27. Davide Pulici, "La maledizione di *Un'ombra nell'ombra*," *Nocturno Cinema* #132, August 2013, 77.
28. "Irene e il fantasma, *Stampa Sera*, August 23, 1979.
29. "In oltre cento cinema parrocchiali si proietterebbero film troppo osé," *Corriere della Sera*, October 13, 1979.
30. Pulici, "La maledizione di *Un'ombra nell'ombra*," 78.
31. Pier Carpi, *Il caso Gelli* (Bologna: i.n.e.i., 1982), 10.

32. "L'ultima lettera," *L'Espresso*, August 21, 1983.

33. "Longo a Craxi: la lettera di Gelli è indirizzata a Pier Carpi, non a me," *Corriere della Sera*, August 13, 1983.

34. Francesco Erbani, "Le storie di Pironti editore scugnizzo," *Repubblica*, May 31, 2005.

35. "Carpi: 'E io chiedo il sequestro,'" *Corriere della Sera*, February 24, 1982.

36. As indicated in an interception contained in acts of criminal cases having as object the P2 Lodge, attached to the report of the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry, Volume VI, tome XIII, 62.

37. "Ipnosi in sala per San Francesco," *La Stampa*, November 3, 1984.

38. The theme of the story is so close to Carpi's work to arouse the legitimate doubt that, behind Bigliardi (described as a "careless housewife ... who writes huddled on a low chair, with a lined notebook, 'because otherwise I'd write awry,'" by Viviana Kasan, "Garibaldi, il paladino del Papa," *Corriere della Sera*, May 17, 1987) there might actually be her husband, who at that time was ostracized by publishers after the P2 scandal. In fact, the author of the article never mentions Carpi's name, not even when it is said that Bigliardi "is happily married to a man she met when she was sixteen." Bigliardi would never publish any other work, except for the volume *I tuoi sogni rivelati*, del 1990. The publisher, Albero, was the same as Carpi's 1988 book *Il diavolo*.

39. The line makes reference to Socialist politician Gianni De Michelis, Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs during the Gulf War.

40. "Pier Carpi a Perlini: 'Rivesti Maria,'" *Corriere della Sera*, March 31, 1993.

41. Riccardo Chiaberge, "Nessuno vuol rivestire Maria nuda," *Corriere della Sera*, April 8, 1993.

42. Achille Beltrame (1871–1945) was a well-known painter and illustrator. For nearly 50 years he painted the covers for Italy's best-selling weekly magazine, *La Domenica del Corriere*.

43. i.c., "Dal Giappone 'Voglio essere Marilyn,'" *La Stampa*, September 20, 1992.

44. "Pier Carpi: scrivo un film su Gelli, conferma da Arezzo," *Corriere della Sera*, January 21, 1994. The project would turn up again later, with Beppe Baghdikian as producer, and with such names involved as Robert De Niro and Alain Delon. No dice this time as well.

45. [Agenzia Agi. "Sto preparando un film," *La Stampa*, April 21, 1994.

46. Riccardo Luna, "Prodi, sì alla fiducia ma è *bagarre* leghista," *Repubblica*, August 1, 1996.

47. Preianò. "Personaggi horror. Intervista ad Alfredo Castelli."

## Chapter 2

1. Alberto Cavallone, "Dal nostro inviato...," *Nocturno cinema* #4, September 1997, 46.

2. Davide Pulici, Manlio Gomarasca, "Il dolce mattatoio. Incontro con Alberto Cavallone," *Nocturno Cinema* #4, September 1997, 46. Except where noted, Cavallone's statements are taken from this interview (pp. 46–56).

3. Giovanni Grazzini, "Concluso ad Este il 'Premio dei colli,'" *Corriere della Sera*, November 2, 1963.

4. Giovanni Arpino, "Documenti. La sporca guerra," *Cinema Nuovo* #167, January / February 1964, 65.

5. Gianni Rondolino, "TV batte cinema al premio 'dei Colli' per le inchieste filmate," *Stampa Sera*, November 5–6, 1963.

6. Paride Calonghi was a talented stage actor who worked mainly on stage and in television. His filmography was limited to a couple of films, *N come negrieri* and *Pelle viva* (Giuseppe Fina, 1962). Calonghi died in 1979: he was only 39.

7. The 8 percent limit for the use of archive footage had been established by law no. 1565 of 22 December 1960 as a requisite for the admission to the law benefits for Italian nationality. Whenever a film exceeded it, the Ministerial commission would view the finished product and judge whether it featured the "peculiar requisites of historical, artistic and cultural value" requested by the law. In the case of *N come negrieri*, the producer listed specifically the archive material needed for the film, namely: the atomic bomb on Hiroshima; the war in Korea; the Indochina war; the 1956 Suez crisis; the war in Algeria; the Cuban missile crisis; the anti-colonialist movements in Congo and Angola; Laos; Kennedy's assassination; the 1963–1964 disorders in Cyprus.

8. An actress by the name Maria Pia *Giordani* appeared in a few titles in the 1950s, although she was primarily a stage thespian, active in musicals and known for her passing resemblance to Kim Novak.

9. Maria Pia Luzi, "Vizi e virtù di un impietoso esploratore dell'anima," *Nocturno Cinema* #5/6, February 1998, 37.

10. Alberto Ceretto, "Tre vite alla deriva," *Corriere d'Informazione*, January 31-February 1, 1968. According to the article, filming was slated to start on February 14, 1968, but a subsequent article dated May 1968 claimed that shooting had "just started."

11. Alberto Ceretto, "C'era una bionda," *Corriere della Sera*, May 21, 1968.

12. During the 1970s Maietto would later produce films by Brunello Rondi, Carlo Lizzani, Stelvio Massi and Marcello Andrei; he became the partner of adults-only publisher Adelina Tattilo, and then of actress Janet Agren, whom he married.

13. "Corriere di Roma. Samperi ora torna a casa," *Corriere d'Informazione*, March 27–28, 1969. According to the article, the other titles were *Le altre* by Alex Fallay, *La bambola di Satana* by Ferruccio Casapinta (the title is actually misspelled

as *Le bambole di Satana*, and the film is mistakenly credited to Fallay as well), both starring Erna Schurer, and two elusive projects: *Venus* (also credited to the Libanese-born Fallay), and another film by Cavallone, *Il paradiso terrestre*.

14. Gianalberto Bendazzi, "Il regista Cavallone tra sesso e politica," *New Cinema* #9, September 1970, 51.

15. Cavallone would use the same footage again in *Blue Movie*, intercutting the scene where Claude Maras takes shots of Dirce Funari as she smears her body with her feces.

16. Maurizio Centini, in Alberto Pezzotta (ed.), "Alberto Cavallone: lo sguardo crudele," *Controcorrente. Il cinema milanese di Eriprando Visconti, Alberto Cavallone, Cesare Canevari. Nocturno Cinema* # 19, January 2004, 31. Centini would be the d.o.p. on many Cavallone films, including his Baron Corvo flicks, where he hid behind the a.k.a. Maurice Arceau.

17. "Rassegna cinematografica," *Corriere della Sera*, May 5, 1969.

18. "Corriere di Roma. Samperi ora torna a casa."

19. Bendazzi, "Il regista Cavallone tra sesso e politica," 52.

20. *Ibid.*, 48.

21. G. Gr. [Giovanni Grazzini], "Rassegna cinematografica," *Corriere della Sera*, May 23, 1970.

22. Bendazzi, "Il regista Cavallone tra sesso e politica," 48,

23. *Ibid.*

24. According to official papers at Rome's SIAE offices, principal shooting for *Follow Me, seguimi nel mondo* started on September 18, 1967, hinting that *Follow Me* was actually the working title of the project also known as *Il ragazzo che faceva fumare il Vesuvio*.

25. Alfonso Madeo, "L'ora della Tv-nana," *Corriere della Sera*, March 10, 1972.

26. Mario Bernardini, "Trasformato in 'shop' d'avanguardia il negozio del 'fattaccio di Trastevere,'" *Corriere d'Informazione*, November 22–23, 1971.

27. *Panorama*, May 4, 1972.

28. Madeo, "L'ora della Tv-nana." Indeed it was, although its makers would not suspect how much so. Cavallone was not the first to exploit the potential of an alternative to the monopoly of State regarding television broadcasting: since 1970, in Piedmont, Giuseppe "Peppo" Sacchi was fighting the system with his cable TV Telebiella. In July 1974, the Constitutional Court established that private citizens were allowed to transmit cable television. Two months later, on September 24, 1974, a small cable TV named Telemilano, founded by Giacomo Properzj, started broadcasting in the residential neighborhood of Milano 2, in Milan. In 1978, it was purchased by a company owned by Silvio Berlusconi, in 1980 it was renamed as Canale 5, and started broadcasting all over Italy.

29. The brother of actress Dominique Boschero, he was one of Cavallone's closer collaborators, not only as an actor, but also as producer, with his society Anna Cinematografica. Boschero was also a dubbing director.

30. L.A. [Leonardo Autera], "Doppi amori," *Corriere della Sera*, January 10, 1974.

31. L.A. [Leonardo Autera], "Erotismo e orrori, Belzebù e 'pop,'" *Corriere della Sera*, November 30, 1974.

32. Davide Pulici, "Misteri milanesi: Attilio Perillo," *Misteri d'Italia 4. Guida ai film rari e scomparsi. Nocturno Cinema* #103, March 2011, 57.

33. The young director Simone Scafidi paid homage to this scene in his remarkable *Eva Braun* (2014).

34. Both scenarios were deposited at SIAE offices on March 14, 1974.

35. Principal shooting began on June 14, 1975.

36. Davide Pulici, "Alessandro Cariello. La luce di Maldoror," *Misteri d'Italia. Guida ai film rari e scomparsi. Nocturno Cinema* #47, June 2006, 6–9.

37. The summary and other bits of informations are taken from Manlio Gomarasca, "Maldoror: la sceneggiatura," *Misteri d'Italia 2. Guida ai film rari e scomparsi. Nocturno Cinema* #58, May 2007, 14–17.

38. L.A. [Leonardo Autera], "L'incubo del sesso," *Corriere della Sera*, May 30, 1977.

39. André Breton, *Anthology of Black Humour* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Publishers, 2001), English translation of *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (Paris: Éditions du Sagittaire, 1940), tr. Mark Polizzotti.

40. Autera, "L'incubo del sesso." Autera's review was reprinted in the Rome edition of the newspaper, one month later, on June 26: by then, the title had changed into *L'uomo, la donna e la bestia (Spell, dolce mattatoio)*.

41. "Spogliandosi discutono," *Corriere della Sera*, August 12, 1977.

42. In July 1977, Cavallone and Boschero deposited another unfilmed scenario at SIAE offices, titled *L'uomo venuto dal ghiaccio*.

43. "Spogliandosi discutono." Years later, in the *Nocturno Cinema* interview, Cavallone claimed to have shot it in eight days and edited it in ten.

44. Davide Pulici, "Cavalloniana 2. Claudio Marani," *Misteri d'Italia 4. Guida ai film rari e scomparsi*, 88.

45. G.B., "Quegli studenti ghettizzati…," *Corriere della Sera*, November 27, 1979. See also Gian Paolo Favero, "La macchina da presa in classe," *Radiocorriere TV #48*, November 25-December 1, 1979, 131.

46. *Nocturno Cinema* #19, 38.

47. Davide Pulici, "Cavalloniana 2008: Le nuove scoperte," *Misteri d'Italia 3. Guida ai film rari e scomparsi. Nocturno Cinema #70*, May 2008, 6.

48. A film titled *Blue Ecstasy* was in fact sub-

mitted to the board of censors in September 1980, but it was actually a French movie directed by Jean Desville, *La feu au sexe*.

49. Roberto Curti and Alessio Di Rocco, "Alberto Cavallone: l'occhio e la carne," in Saverio Giannatempo (ed.), *Schermi (h)ardenti: pornocinema italiano e dintorni* (Rome: Profondo Rosso, 2012), 90.

50. Adriano Sollazzo, "Colpo di scena nel 'giallo' De Paolini: arrestato un produttore cinematografico," *Corriere della Sera*, 7 April 1981.

51. The working title was *Il nano e la strega* (The Dwarf and the Witch), same as that of an adult animated feature directed in 1976 by Gioacchino Libratti. There also exists a softcore Spanish language version titled *Essere tenuto* (Being Captured), which surfaced on the U.S. grey market video in the 1990s, with English subtitles.

52. Andrea Napoli, "Io e Alberto," *Cine 70 e dintorni* #5, 61.

53. As noted by some, this is the only intercourse in the film not characterized by speculative reasons and destructive results, unlike the heterosexual sex scene that will follow. See Andrea Napoli, "L'occhio (porno) che uccide," *Cine 70 e dintorni* #5, 2004, 57.

54. Giulio Cavallone, *Nocturno Cinema* #19, 41.

55. Pietro Belpedio, in "Alberto Cavallone: lo sguardo crudele."

56. "Un film italiano di 'fantapreistoria,'" *Corriere della Sera*, June 26, 1982.

57. Lamberto Antonelli, "Maria Vittoria medico della tribù," *Stampa Sera*, October 15, 1983.

58. The production data and plot for *Il cliente misterioso* are thoroughly discussed in Alessio Di Rocco, "Cavalloniana 1. I film perduti," *Misteri d'Italia 4. Guida ai film rari e scomparsi*, 86–87, and in Davide Pulici, "Dentro e fuori lo specchio." *Misteri d'Italia 5. Guida ai film rari e scomparsi. Nocturno Cinema*, *Nocturno* #131, July/August 2013, 61.

59. Cavallone, "Dal nostro inviato...," 46.

## Chapter 3

1. Riccardo Ghione, unpublished statements collected by Federico Pierotti in 1999. A shortened version of the interview appeared in *Ciemme*, #136–137, June–September 2001.

2. Ghione was not new to the American experience: in May 1936, upon invitation by Thaddeus Wronski, director of the Detroit Civic Opera, who admired his *mise-en-scène* of *Otello*, the Italian conductor flew to the United States to direct *The Dybbuk*, by Lodovico Rocca. But after a triumphal opening in Detroit, the opera was met with hostility in New York, at Carnegie Hall, and closed down after just one performance instead of the scheduled three.

3. Regarding Maria Callas' only recording with the Piedmontese conductor, a *Traviata* which played in Lisbon in 1955, John Ardoin wrote: "The fault that Callas is not given fuller rein to create a more dimensional Violetta rests with the pedestrian conducting of Franco Ghione." John Ardoin, *The Callas Legacy: The Complete Guide to Her Recordings on Compact Disc* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Amadeus Press, 1995), 134.

4. Laurie Lanzen Harris, Paul Ganson, *The Detroit Symphony Orchestra: Grace, Grit, and Glory* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012).

5. Federico Pierotti, "Intervista a Riccardo Ghione," *Ciemme* #136–137, June–September 2001, 17.

6. *Ibid*.

7. *Ibid*.

8. "He came to my house when we were young, and we played together, because his father [Author's note: Felice Lattuada] was a musician, like mine, and my father directed his father's opera at La Scala, and so we were in constant contact." Riccardo Ghione, unpublished statements collected by Federico Pierotti.

9. *Ibid*.

10. Riccardo Ghione, "Cosa fu *Documento Mensile*," in Lino Micciché (ed.), *Studi su dodici sguardi d'autore in cortometraggio* (Turin: Associazione Philip Morris Progetto Cinema—Lindau, 1995), 297.

11. Pierotti, "Intervista a Riccardo Ghione," 17.

12. "*Cinema gira*," *Cinema* #44, August 15, 1950, 66–67.

13. Pierotti, "Intervista a Riccardo Ghione," 18.

14. "He settled in an armchair in front of our two beds, and since it was cold and there were no blankets, he packed his body with the paper of several newspapers that he had brought with himself. He slept all night like that. In the darkness of that room I saw that puppet made of newspapers, right in front of me." Giulio Questi, *Se non ricordo male* (Bari: Rubbettino, 2014), 32.

15. E.P., "Il cinema tascabile degli scrittori italiani," *Cinema—nuova serie*, #53, December 30, 1950, 368–369.

16. Giuliano Ferrieri, "*Documento Mensile*. Nuova rassegna dell'attualità cinematografica," *Il Nuovo Corriere*, April 19, 1950, 3.

17. *La terrazza*, signed "Pseudo," appeared in the magazine *Tempo* (#194, February 11, 1943); it was published again, retitled *Colpa del sole* and with ample rewritings, in Milan's edition of the daily newspaper *Il Tempo*, on November 17, 1946. It is currently included in the anthology *Racconti dispersi (1928–1951)*, published in 2000 by Bompiani.

18. Luciano De Giusti, "Vita breve di *Documento Mensile*," in Luciano De Giusti (ed.), *Storia del cinema italiano 1949/1953* (Venice/Rome: Marsilio/Edizioni di Bianco & Nero, 2003), 98.

19. Giulio Questi, "Moravia regista e Carlo Levi alla moviola," *L'Avanti!*, January 6, 1951.

20. Pierotti, "Intervista a Riccardo Ghione," 20.
21. *Ibid.*, 19.
22. *Ibid.*, 17.
23. *Cinema—nuova serie*, #75, December 1, 1951, 280.
24. A contribution of the 3 percent of the gross amount of the shows in which the film had been screened for a period of three years from the first release date; then, always with the Technical Committee's assent, a further contribution of the 2 percent of the gross amount of the shows in which the film had been screened, in cases of exceptional technical and artistic value.
25. *Ibid.*
26. "Distances do not exist only among men: there is, even outside us, a profound teaching among the satiated pride with which the rich cat wanders caressingly among the columns of the Forum, and the fearful and begging misery with which the cat of the slums runs away between a capital and a stalwart base, hungry and thieving." Ferrieri, "*Documento Mensile*. Nuova rassegna dell'attualità cinematografica," 3.
27. Riccardo Ghione, unpublished statements collected by Federico Pierotti. It must be noted that the versions on the actual authors of the script for *Il cappotto* differ: Lattuada claimed that, even though his name was listed in the credits, Zavattini had only taken part in the screenplay meetings without ever writing anything, and attributed the merit to Malerba, with the collaboration of Giorgio Prosperi and Sinisgalli; according to producer Giordano Corsi, instead, the script was written for the most part by Prosperi alone. Ghione is credited on *Il cappotto* as responsible for the post-production.
28. M.g., "Il balletto delle ombre," *La Stampa*, March 26, 1953. Among the filmmakers involved, the names of Luciano Emmer, Giorgio Franciolini and Piero Tellini are also mentioned.
29. "First I had to make *La strada* by Fellini: I practically sponsored the film to the company that produced it, with Pegoraro etcetera. And in fact, they made it. And then, since Federico and I were friends … I told him "I'm doing this *Amore in città*, if you want to participate … but look, I'm not giving you a *lira* because I don't have any; I'm just giving you something symbolical," I think 200,000 *lire*." Riccardo Ghione, unpublished statements collected by Federico Pierotti. However, *La strada* was not produced by Lorenzo Pegoraro, who had financed *I vitelloni*, but by Carlo Ponti and Dino De Laurentiis.
30. Giampiero Berengo Gardin, "Ferreri, El Picaro," *Cinema 60* #53, 1965, 49.
31. Giulio Andreotti, "Piaghe sociali e necessità di redenzione," *Libertas*, February 28, 1952.
32. Riva died on September 1, 1960, several days after a fall from stage during the recording of his TV show *Il Musichiere* at the Verona Arena, which happened on August 21, 1960.
33. A film about the Venezuelan patriot was helmed by Alessandro Blasetti in 1969: it was an Italian-Spanish co-production, starring Maximilian Schell.
34. *Les animaux* (1965) by Frédéric Rossif.
35. Ettore Zocaro, "Anarchia e malessere dell'infanzia," *Filmcritica* #176, April 1967, 159.
36. "*Il limbo* per l'Italia alla Settimana della critica a Cannes," *L'Unità*, April 19, 1967.
37. Zocaro, "Anarchia e malessere dell'infanzia," 159.
38. *Ibid.*
39. "*Il limbo* per l'Italia alla Settimana della critica a Cannes."
40. Zocaro, "Anarchia e malessere dell'infanzia," 161.
41. *Ibid.*
42. "Panoramica: *La rivoluzione sessuale*," *Cinema 60* #67/68, 1967, 121.
43. L.P. [Leo Pestelli], "*La rivoluzione sessuale* sconfitta dai sentimenti," *La Stampa*, November 11, 1968.
44. "He called me at 1:00 a.m., after watching it, to tell me that the film was very interesting and that he liked it, despite the censors' massacre. He was intrigued by the film language that I used in the shooting." Ghione, "Cosa fu *Documento Mensile*," 299.
45. Pestelli, "*La rivoluzione sessuale* sconfitta dai sentimenti."
46. "Un gatto v.m.18," *Corriere d'Informazione*, July 23–24, 1971.
47. "Visconti non farà più il film ispirato alla "Ricerca" di Proust?," *Corriere d'Informazione*, August 11–12, 1971.
48. A.S., "La moglie hippie," *Corriere d'Informazione*, June 14, 1972.
49. Alberto Ceretto, "*Il male oscuro* a Milano," *Corriere d'Informazione*, March 10–11, 1972.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Pierotti, "Intervista a Riccardo Ghione," 21.
52. See Davide Pulici, *Rosso piacentino*, extra in the Italian DVD *Il prato macchiato di rosso*.
53. Alberto Scandola, *Marco Ferreri* (Milan: Editrice Il Castoro, 2004), 9.
54. Pierotti, "Intervista a Riccardo Ghione," 18.
55. *Ibid.*

## Chapter 4

1. Giulio Questi, *Se non ricordo male* (Bari: Rubbettino, 2014), 21. Unless otherwise noted, all the quotes from Questi are taken from here.
2. Alberto Ceretto, "I nastri d'argento del cinema italiano," *Corriere della Sera*, February 9, 1958.
3. "La cantante Anna Moffo ingaggiata per un film," *Corriere d'Informazione*, September 25–26, 1959.
4. A.F., "Sarà un western italiano il prossimo film di Fellini," *Corriere d'Informazione*, June 15–16, 1960.

5. The project originally took form as *L'amore in Italia*.

6. Nelli originally directed two episodes, one of which was cut from the movie.

7. Ugo Naldi, "La Pierangeli preferisce l'irrequietezza," *Corriere d'Informazione*, August 26–27, 1961.

8. Marco Giusti and Enrico Ghezzi (eds.), *Kim Arcalli: montare il cinema* (Venice: Marsilio, 1980–2008), 68.

9. *Ibid.*, 19.

10. a.a. [Alberto Abruzzese], "Cinema 60" #45, September 1964, 61–62.

11. Candido, *Cineforum* #19, November 1962, 970.

12. "*Nudi per vivere* sequestrato a Roma," *Corriere della Sera*, March 10, 1964.

13. Alberico Sala, "La brutta spina della censura," *Corriere d'Informazione*, March 13–14, 1964.

14. "Aggiornata la causa per *Nudi per vivere*," *Corriere della Sera*, April 22, 1964.

15. "Assolto il produttore Pegoraro," *Corriere della Sera*, May 19, 1964.

16. Alberto Ceretto, "Spagnolo scrittore l'uomo ideale di 'Giulietta,'" *Corriere d'Informazione*, January 13–14, 1965.

17. Giulio Questi, "Où sont-ils les gars d'antan?," in Stefano Piselli and Riccardo Molocchi (eds.), *Western all'italiana. Book Two—The Wild the Sadist and the Outsiders* (Florence: Glittering Images, 2001), 9.

18. Although the opening titles list the story as based on an idea by María del Carmen Martínez Román, this credit was included merely for coproduction reasons.

19. "Il postino suonerà ancora due volte," *Corriere d'Informazione*, May 3–4, 1966.

20. Alberto Crespi, "Il mio western, la Resistenza," *L'Unità*, April 24, 1994.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Giusti and Ghezzi (eds.), *Kim Arcalli: montare il cinema*, 68.

23. "Sequestrato a Monza *Se sei vivo spara*," *Corriere della Sera*, March 8, 1967.

24. "Monza: due tagli a *Se sei vivo spara*," *Corriere della Sera*, March 15, 1967.

25. A.F., "Milian lascia l'"impegno" per il western," *Corriere d'Informazione*, February 10–11, 1967.

26. In his memoir, Questi recalls that he envisioned *Più a fondo nelle foreste* during a visit to his wife Marilú on the set of Gillo Pontecorvo's *Queimada*, in 1968, but this is at odds with the news of the project being discussed with Milian, which came out a year earlier in the press.

27. Davide Pulici, "Incontro con Giulio Questi," *Nocturno Cinema* #5/6, February 1998, 14.

28. Giusti and Ghezzi (eds.), *Kim Arcalli: montare il cinema*, 69.

29. *Ibid.*

30. a.v., "Un film di gusto "pop" in anteprima a St. Vincent," *Stampa Sera*, December 11–12, 1967. In an amusing mistake, the article credits the famed writer Luigi Malerba as the author of the score, instead of Bruno Maderna. See also "Presentato a Saint Vincent *La morte ha fatto l'uovo*," *Corriere della Sera*, December 12, 1967.

31. Tullio Kezich, *Dieci anni al cinema 1967–1977* (Milan: Il Formichiere, 1977), 366.

32. Alberto Moravia, "Una scatola di mostri," *L'Espresso*, January 21, 1968.

33. Film critic Craig Ledbetter, the founder of the pioneering fanzine *European Trash Cinema*, was adamant that *Death Laid an Egg* was "a touchstone in the mutation of my film interest." Ledbetter even devoted a special issue of ETC to Questi's film, with reviews from different contributors. See Craig Ledbetter (ed.), "Death Laid an Egg forum," *European Trash Cinema*, Vol. 1, #9/10, 1991.

34. "Un avvocato chiede il sequestro del film," *Corriere d'Informazione*, January 22–23, 1968.

35. l.z., "L'ultimo film di Robbe-Grillet sequestrato dalla Magistratura," *La Stampa*, February 11, 1968.

36. Giusti and Ghezzi (eds.), *Kim Arcalli: montare il cinema*, 70.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Al. Cer. [Alberto Ceretto], "La Bosé e la magia," *Corriere della Sera*, August 27, 1970.

39. Giovanni Grazzini, "Sanremo: vince la Finlandia con i "sogni" di uno studente," *Corriere della Sera*, April 15, 1972.

40. Alberto Ceretto, "muoiono tutti o quasi in *Roma bene*," *Corriere d'Informazione*, March 27–28, 1971.

41. Pulici, "*Incontro con Giulio Questi*," 16.

42. Margherita Cottone, "Furio Jesi: Vampirismo e didattica. Le lezioni su 'Il vampiro e l'automa nella cultura tedesca dal XVIII al XX secolo,'" *Cultura tedesca* #12, 1999, 53.

43. The episodes' titles were *L'uomo che sapeva troppo poco*, *Addio maschio crudele*, *Siamo a cavallo*, *Morto per morto* and *La notte delle stelle*. See Giovanna Grassi, "Il mio detective è un ex giudice, buon lettore di fumetti d'azione e di Lacan," *Corriere della Sera*, August 26, 1984.

44. Giovanna Grassi, "William Hurt a Montecarlo?," *Corriere della Sera*, July 31, 1986.

45. Valerio Cappelli, "Mastroianni-Andrews, "Cin cin,"" *Corriere della Sera*, August 11, 1989.

46. Other titles announced were *Cin cin*, starring Marcello Mastroianni and Julie Andrews, Folco Quilici's *Cacciatori di navi*, and *L'ombra abitata*, from the novel by Alberto Ongaro, to be directed by Bruno Cortini (who unfortunately died in October 1989).

47. For more details, see Roberto Curti, *Italian Gothic Horror Films, 1970–1979* (Jefferson NC: McFarland, 2017), 219–221.

48. "Il kolossal "tagliato" in Tv un anno dopo," *Corriere della Sera*, August 19, 1992.

49. Aldo Grasso, "Quei fantasmi a tutta birra," *Corriere della Sera*, August 21, 1992.

## Chapter 5

1. Cesare Zavattini, "Diario," *Cinema nuovo*, #126, March 1958, 136–137.
2. l.a. [Leonardo Autera], "Tecnica di un amore," *Corriere della Sera*, May 17, 1973.
3. Brunello Rondi, *Il neorealismo italiano* (Parma: Guanda, 1956), 98.
4. "Due voci," *Corriere d'Informazione*, 27–28 September 1958.
5. [Not signed], "L'esito del concorso drammatico di Assisi," *Corriere della Sera*, July 19, 1959.
6. "Pieno successo ad Assisi de *L'assedio* di Rondi," *Corriere della Sera*, August 26, 1959.
7. "Ostinato e riformatore il "capitano" di Rondi," *Corriere d'Informazione*, May 18–19, 1961.
8. Federico Fellini, *Intervista sul cinema* (edited by Giovanni Grazzini) (Bari: Laterza, 1983–2004), 126–127.
9. "I thought ancient history could be brought to the screen with enormous zest for life, a wonderful sunny and playful attitude which Fellini clearly repudiated.... So that is why, despite having a very important contract with [producer] Alberto Grimaldi to sign the screenplay at par with others, I asked that my name appeared simply as a contributor to the subject...." Brunello Rondi, in Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi (eds.), *Il cinema italiano d'oggi 1970–1984 raccontato dai suoi protagonisti* (Milan: Mondadori, 1984), 241.
10. "Incidenti a Roma per la proiezione d'un film," *La Stampa*, January 14, 1952.
11. U.N. [Ugo Naldi], "*Una vita violenta* aggredirà Cannes?," *Corriere d'Informazione*, January 23–24, 1962.
12. l.z., "La censura blocca *Una vita violenta*," *La Stampa*, March 21, 1962.
13. See, for instance, a.s. [Alberico Sala], "Una vita violenta," *Corriere d'Informazione*, April 11–12, 1962.
14. Alberto Pezzotta, *Introduction to "Una vita violenta,"* essay included in the booklet of the Italian DVD release of the film (Minerva Classic).
15. "Daliah Lavi parla ma la voce non è sua," *Corriere d'Informazione*, June 26–27, 1963.
16. Alberto Ceretto, "Daliah Lavi bella ragazza indemoniata," *Corriere d'Informazione*, February 15–16, 1963.
17. Raymond Durgnat, *Sexual Alienation in the Cinema* (London: Studio Vista, 1972), 163.
18. Brunello Rondi, "Come, perché ho girato *Il demonio*," *Filmcritica* #143–144, March–April 1964.
19. Luciano Martino, "L'entusiasmo della prima volta," in Stefania Parigi and Alberto Pezzotta (eds.), *Il lungo respiro di Brunello Rondi* (Rieti: Edizioni Sabinae, Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, 2010), 255.
20. Edoardo Bruno, "Realtà e surrealtà ne *Il demonio* di Rondi," *Filmcritica* #145, May 1964.
21. Durgnat, *Sexual Alienation in the Cinema*, 164.
22. Franca Faldini and Goffredo Fofi (eds.), *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano raccontata dai suoi protagonisti 1960–1969* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1981), 163.
23. "Monica Vitti "ideale" per Rondi," *Corriere della Sera*, November 24, 1963.
24. Dario Argento, "Rondi: un "Bel Ami" moderno tra i progetti," *Paese Sera*, November 9, 1963.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Brunello Rondi, "Un rapporto civile," *Paese Sera*, September 27, 1964.
27. Al. Cer. [Alberto Ceretto], "Partiti per l'Oscar con molta speranza," *Corriere della Sera*, April 11, 1964.
28. Dario Argento, "Per Rondi: ancora un tema che scotta," *Paese Sera*, July 29, 1965.
29. See Alberto Ceretto, "Il 'magic moment' di Elga Andersen," *Corriere della Sera*, August 23, 1965.
30. *Run, Psycho, Run* was dubbed at the same European dubbing studio where such AIP-TV films like *War of the Monsters* and *The Last Man on Earth* were dubbed. Among the leads' voices there were those of Carolyn De Fonseca and John Karlsen (who also had a bit role in the film). Gary Merrill did his own dubbing.
31. Raul Radice, "La stanza degli ospiti al Teatro della Cometa," *Corriere della Sera*, January 10, 1966.
32. Mario Foglietti, "Due persone sono più di un coro," *Il Popolo*, September 27, 1965.
33. Emidio Jattarelli, "Due film e due commedie nei piani di Brunello Rondi," *Il Tempo*, May 11, 1966.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Al. Cer. [Alberto Ceretto], "Per Ingrid Thulin nuovo film a Roma," *Corriere della Sera*, July 22, 1966.
36. "La Buccella festeggia la fine di un film," *Corriere d'Informazione*, November 21–22, 1966.
37. Other plays were never put on stage, namely a three-act drama, *Il grattacielo* (1967, also known as *La signora sola*, and dedicated to Giorgio Albertazzi), the two-act *La casa a due piani* (or *Il bombardamento*), and the two-act comedy *L'ultimo giorno* (1976).
38. Alberto Ceretto, "Il viaggio in aprile ma chi lo farà?" *Corriere d'Informazione*, January 20–21, 1967.
39. Alberto Ceretto, "Rivive l'Apocalisse nel nuovo film di Rondi," *Corriere della Sera*, January 22, 1967.
40. "Una luna di miele che nasconde un delitto," *Corriere della Sera*, October 10, 1967.
41. "Luna di miele," *Corriere della Sera*, November 20, 1967.
42. Al. Cer. [Alberto Ceretto], "Fuori gioco," *Corriere della Sera*, January 9, 1969.
43. Al. Cer. [Alberto Ceretto], "Parapsicologia sullo schermo," *Corriere della Sera*, April 10, 1969.
44. Al. Cer. [Alberto Ceretto], "Travagli e com-

plessi di un giovane d'oggi," *Corriere della Sera*, July 23, 1969.

45. G. Gr. [Giovanni Grazzini], "Rassegna cinematografica," *Corriere della Sera*, May 28, 1970.

46. A.M. Pinnizzotto, "Barbara folle d'amore," *Paese Sera*, March 18, 1972.

47. Alberto Ceretto, "Con l'occhio del cinema nei tormenti di una donna," *Corriere della Sera*, February 22, 1972.

48. Ceretto, "Travagli e complessi di un giovane d'oggi."

49. Bir. [Guglielmo Biraghi], "Valeria dentro e fuori," *Il Messaggero*, June 1, 1972.

50. G. Gr. [Giovanni Grazzini], "Rassegna cinematografica," *Corriere della Sera*, June 21, 1972.

51. D.g., "*Un viaggio alla scoperta della donna*," *L'Unità*, June 1, 1972.

52. Andrea Pergolari, *La fabbrica del riso. 32 sceneggiatori raccontano la storia del cinema italiano* (Rome: Unmondoaparte, 2005), 238–239.

53. Roberto Leoni, "Il signore del set," in Parigi and Pezzotta (eds.), *Il lungo respiro di Brunello Rondi*, 249.

54. l.a. [Leonardo Autera], "Rossano Brazzi maestro d'amore," *Corriere della Sera*, November 2, 1972.

55. "Janet, in sogno," *La Stampa*, October 17, 1972.

56. "All'isola di Ponza," *La Stampa*, February 24, 1973.

57. Alberto Pezzotta, "Alla scoperta dell'autore impari," *Segnocinema* #110, July-August 2001, 7.

58. The board of censors requested cuts in four scenes: a couple of bits featuring female masturbation, another where Marilù Tolo appears totally nude and masturbates, and the "group scene" in the end.

59. Ranuccio Bastoni, "Il suicida di Fellini: mai seguire il gregge," *Corriere d'Informazione*, September 24–25, 1975.

60. Ranuccio Bastoni, "Dopo Lizzani prostituzione secondo Rondi," *Corriere d'Informazione*, October 14–15, 1975

61. The scene was trimmed of about 5 seconds in order to obtain a V.M.18 rating.

62. G. Gs. [Giovanna Grassi], "Lenoni d'alta borghesia," *Corriere della Sera*, June 3, 1976.

63. Fabrizio Fogliato, "Brunello Rondi parte 9—*I prosseneti*," www.zabriskiepoint.net.

64. The names Emanuelle and Laure can be heard only in the Italian version, as several characters' names have been changed in the dubbing: Emanuelle (Laura Gemser) becomes Laura, Laure (Annie Belle) becomes Pia, Antonio (Al Cliver) becomes Horatio.

65. Credited to Emmanuelle Arsan, *Laure* was in fact directed by Louis-Jacques Rollet-Andriane and Roberto D'Ettorre Piazzoli.

66. Original Italian dialogue. As can be noticed comparing the Italian and English audio tracks on the U.S. Severin DVD, the latter is quite different.

67. Maurizio Porro, "Una giornata a tu per tu con Fellini nel cantiere della *Città delle donne*," *Corriere della Sera*, October 23, 1979.

68. "Brunello Rondi, who's back from India, tells me that he saw a fakir who can remove the virginity of the girls who offer themselves to him, only with his stare; and with his stare he makes them pregnant. 'Why don't you put it in the film?' he asks. 'I have also another idea for the show in your story: an Indian woman who, like in temples, can use all her limbs and satisfy 8 men at a time.'" Federico Fellini, "Ginger e Fred dagli appunti di Fellini," *Corriere della Sera*, April 20, 1985.

69. Alberto Pezzotta, "Brunellone e Federico. La collaborazione con Fellini," in Parigi and Pezzotta (eds.), *Il lungo respiro di Brunello Rondi*, 255.

70. Gianfranco Angelucci, "Su quell'"Olimpo" erotico c'è solo l'ombra di Fellini," *Il Giornale*, April 15, 2017.

71. Tonino Valerii had also attempted to bring to the screen *La vigna di uve nere*, a few years earlier, unsuccessfully: producer Francesco Mazzei offered him to direct *La ragazza di nome Giulio* instead. See Roberto Curti, *Tonino Valerii* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 57.

72. R. Mar., "La prostituzione a Roma in un film di Brunello Rondi," *Il Tempo*, January 12, 1973.

73. For a detailed analysis of *La principessa sul pisello*, see Roberto Curti, *Diabolika. Superheroes, Supercriminals and the Comic Book Universe in Italian Cinema* (Baltimore, MD: Midnight Marquee Press, 2016), 149–151.

74. The first treatment, dated 1972, was titled *L'"altro" amore*, which evolved into a script titled *Paradiso Alakamanda*, a reference to the "Celestial City," the Eden of Hinduism.

75. [Ansa agency], "La stella di Bergman per Rondi," *La Stampa*, January 29, 1974.

76. Leonardo Autera, "Madre Teresa di Calcutta e Klossowski con signora," *Corriere della Sera*, September 3, 1982.

77. *Ibid.*

78. Alberto Bevilacqua, "'Test' e testamenti," *Corriere della Sera*, April 3, 1983.

79. T.B. [Teresa Buongiorno], "Storia di una vocazione," *Radiocorriere TV* #13, March 27–April 2, 1983, 57.

80. Brunello Rondi, "Tv, che fare?," *Il Messaggero*, August 18, 1986.

## Chapter 6

1. Ester De Miro, "Un aristocratico a Cinecittà," in Claudio Bertieri and Marco Salotti (eds.), *Genova in celluloide. I registi liguri* (Genoa: Comune di Genova—Assessorato alla cultura, 1984), 166.

2. Riccardo Freda, *Divoratori di celluloide* (Milan: Edizioni del Mystfest—Il Formichiere, 1981), 96–97.

3. L.V., "Regista italiano cerca Patricia Gozzi

per 'L'Estate,'" *Corriere della Sera*, November 24, 1964.

4. De Miro, "Un aristocratico a Cinecittà," 166.

5. Giovanni Grazzini, "La fuga," *Corriere della Sera*, January 24, 1965.

6. *Corriere della Sera*, May 27, 1964.

7. L.V., "Regista italiano cerca Patricia Gozzi per *L'Estate*."

8. Bosley Crowther, "Handsome Photography Helps Italian Import," *New York Times*, March 22, 1966.

9. Joseph Gelmis, "*La Fuga* Bores Deep, All Right," *Newsday*, March 22, 1966. For a review similar in tone, see Clifford Terry, "Brooding Italian Film Has Good Acting," *Chicago Tribune*, December 19, 1966.

10. George McKinnon, "Tasteful Treatment of Sensitive Theme," *The Boston Globe*, October 20, 1966.

11. L.V., "Regista italiano cerca Patricia Gozzi per *L'Estate*."

12. De Miro, "Un aristocratico a Cinecittà," 170.

13. *Ibid.*, 168.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Roberto Alemanno, *Itinerari della violenza: il film negli anni della restaurazione (1970–1980)* (Bari: Edizioni Dedalo, 1982), 57.

16. The film is actually *3 colpi di Winchester per Ringo*, directed by Spinola's old acquaintance, Emimmo Salvi.

17. "Contro il cinema 'sexy,'" *Corriere della Sera*, June 24, 1969.

18. Alberto Moravia, "Donna invisibile," *Corriere della Sera*, February 4, 1968. The short story was later included in the anthology *Il paradiso* (1970).

19. L.J., "La donna invisibile non è un film osceno," *Corriere della Sera*, September 8, 1969.

20. L.A. [Leonardo Autera], "*La Ralli su 2 fronti*," *Corriere della Sera*, December 4, 1969.

21. E.B., "Film-documento di Paolo Spinola sui problemi dei giovani d'oggi," *La Stampa*, March 27, 1977.

22. Manlio Gomarasca and Davide Pulici, *99 donne. Stelle e stelline del cinema italiano* (Milan: MediaWord Production, 1999), 74.

23. In an interview on the set, where Annie Belle reportedly referred to herself (thanks no doubt to the intervention of the interviewer, Lina Sotis) as "porn-star," the French actress called Spinola's film "the turning point of my career," adding: "it is to him that I owe, to a large extent, the choice of turning from a porn-star into an actress." Lina Sotis, "Non credo nel nudo," *Corriere d'Informazione*, January 6, 1977.

24. De Miro, "Un aristocratico a Cinecittà," 170.

## Chapter 7

1. Domenico Monetti and Luca Pallanch (eds.), *Il caso Tretti* (Bari: Rubbettino, 2015), 12.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Giannalberto Bendazzi, "Ha *Il potere* nel cassetto il Don Chisciotte del cinema," *L'Avanti!*, February 5, 1971.

4. Enrico Soci and Alberto Maffettone (eds.), *Augusto Tretti: che ridere ... il potere è nudo!* (Bassano: Ipotesi Cinema, 1992), 31.

5. Tretti's declaration is taken from Maurizio Zaccaro's documentary short *Augusto Tretti, un ritratto* (1985).

6. Monetti and Pallanch (eds.), *Il caso Tretti*, 3.

7. Declaration taken from *Augusto Tretti, un ritratto*.

8. Luca Barattoni, *Italian Post-Neorealist Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 190.

9. 29–30.

10. Declaration taken from *Augusto Tretti, un ritratto*.

11. Enrico Soci, "Una risata per denudare il potere," in Soci and Maffettone (eds.), *Augusto Tretti: che ridere ... il potere è nudo!*, 25.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Monetti and Pallanch (eds.), *Il caso Tretti*, 15–16.

14. Soci and Maffettone (eds.), *Augusto Tretti: che ridere ... il potere è nudo!*, 14.

15. Paolo Mereghetti, "Addio al regista Tretti tra i preferiti di Fellini," *Corriere della Sera*, June 8, 2013.

16. Monetti and Pallanch (eds.), *Il caso Tretti*, 4.

17. Alberto Ceretto, Un regista originale cerca fondi per *Il potere*," *Corriere della Sera*, November 25, 1965.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Bendazzi, "Ha *Il potere* nel cassetto il Don Chisciotte del cinema."

20. Nedo Ivaldi, *La prima volta a Venezia*, 185.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Ugo Casiraghi, "Augusto Tretti," in Soci and Maffettone (eds.), *Augusto Tretti: che ridere ... il potere è nudo!*, 7.

23. Monetti and Pallanch (eds.), *Il caso Tretti*, 112.

24. *Ibid.*, 124.

25. "Le "Noci d'oro" ai giovani divi," *La Stampa*, September 18, 1972. Others awarded at the same edition of the "Noci d'oro" were actors Rada Rassimov and Maurizio Degli Esposti.

26. Soci, "Una risata per denudare il potere," 26.

27. *Ibid.*, 28.

28. Casiraghi, "Augusto Tretti," 9.

29. Angelo Falvo, "Una brutta sbronza non fa un buon film," *Corriere d'Informazione*, September 2, 1980.

30. Soci, "Una risata per denudare il potere," 28.

31. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

## Chapter 8

1. Padre Pio (real name Francesco Forgione, 1887–1968) was a friar and mystic, now venerated as a saint by the Catholic Church.

2. Nello Vegezzi, letter to Janna Vegezzi, December 1961. From Nello Vegezzi's private archive, courtesy of Camillo Vegezzi, who kindly provided this document and the other material related to *Katarsis* mentioned in the text.

3. Nello Vegezzi, "Explicative note" to *Katarsis*.

4. Franco Valobra, "Le ragazze del "Centro" fanno la fame," *Le ore* #7, February 21, 1963, 26.

5. Christopher Lee, *Tall, Dark and Gruesome* (Baltimore, MD: Midnight Marquee Press, 1999), 187, and Christopher Lee, *Lord of Misrule: The Autobiography of Christopher Lee* (London: Orion Publishing, 2004), 207.

6. "Un giovane regista si getta nel vuoto ma finisce su una tettoia e si salva," *Il Tempo*, July 20, 1963.

7. Piero Vida, letter to Nello Vegezzi, August 10, 1963.

8. *Sexy Party*, directed by Jean Josipovici and Ambrogio Molteni, was released in 1964 as *Delitto allo specchio (Sexy Party)*, starring John Drew Barrymore and Michel Lemoine. Its plot has a number of similarities with *Katarsis*, although the film is basically a whodunit.

9. Nello Vegezzi, private letter to Alain Raygot, November 11, 1964.

10. Alain Raygot, private letter to Nello Vegezzi, December 14, 1964.

11. Nello Vegezzi, private letter to Alain Raygot, May 8, 1965.

12. Piero Vida, private letter to Nello Vegezzi, May 17, 1965.

13. Eco Film, letter to Giuseppe Vegezzi, June 9, 1965.

14. It is not the only misspelling error in the credits: Lee's name is typed "Cristopher."

15. "Katarsis o cassetta?," *Paese Sera*, November 14, 1965. See also "Un regista protesta per la 'paternità' di un film," *Il Tempo*, November 27, 1965.

16. Marco Bellocchio, declaration included in the documentary featurette *Rivolta ed incanto. Ritratto di Nello Vegezzi* (2004, Stefano Sampaolo).

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